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THE KING'S FOOL; Or, The Knights of the Clasped Hands and Red Branch.

BY C. DUNNING CLARK.



"MY RACE SHALL NOT CEASE IN ULSTER," CRIED THE QUEEN. "MY SON, MY SON! HE SHALL AVENGE THE BLOOD WHICH WAS FOULLY SHED THIS DAY!"

The King's Fool;

OR,

The Knights of the Claspéd Hands and Red Branch.

A Romance of Irish Chivalry.

BY C. D. CLARK.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK MASSACRE—THE DYING QUEEN'S VISION.

THE ring of steel, the shouts of fighting men, and the shrill neighing of horses, sounded through the arches of an Irish forest, in the days long since passed away.

It was the day of the glory of Erin, when many kings swayed the scepter in her sea-girt isle, and men fought for glory in the steel armor of knights. When the names of Connor, Redmond and O'Neal were great in the land, and when the seas of Rory and of Moyne were covered with the war galleys of her hundred kings. When Fergus was strong in Alba, and the men of Norway swept the sea.

The battle was in a circular glade in the deep wood, hemmed in on every side by huge forest trees. A dim, dark place, suited well for deeds of blood. Here fifty men in hunting-garb were seen in a desperate ring, hemmed about by a hundred men in armor. Yet the dauntless fifty shouted, unfalteringly to each other, as they fought, foot to foot, with their heavily armed enemies.

In the midst of the circle of half-armed huntsmen a lady sat upon a beautifully caparisoned palfrey, watching the course of the battle with an eye that did not change or lose its light, even while the spear-points gleamed bright before her, and the shouts of the enemy rung louder in her ears. In her own train there was but a single knight, and he was without a helmet. No pair more gloriously beautiful—he in his mighty form, coal black hair, and haughty look; she with her sunny hair and sweet, calm face—ever trod the shores of Erin.

"We shall die here, my husband," exclaimed the lady. "He who has lusted so long to sit upon your throne must work his will upon us, but Heaven will protect the boy."

"You do well to hide yourself behind a shield which bears no blazon, thou vile coward," cried the knight. "Man to man, you dare not face me, even in your mail!"

He spoke to a tall knight, who, covering his breast with a shield which bore no device, sat like a graven statue upon his horse, while his men poured down upon the huntsmen. Yet, stubbornly they stood, and not a man flinched as they opposed their light boar-spears and hunting-knives to the long lances and swords of their enemies.

"Death of my life," cried the knight on horseback. "Sweep me away this carrion! Why do ye let them stand up against you in this way? Strike hard, sons of Ulster; let them feel your steel."

The huntsmen answered by a cheery shout, and for a moment actually bore back before them the heavily armed men who opposed them. But their desperate bravery was vain against men armed in proof, and man by man they went down.

"Yield, King of Ulster," cried the knight in armor. "Better save the blood of these brave men, for they are worthy to follow me in battle."

"Though my son should speak of yielding I would cleave him to the teeth, thou felon knight," responded the chief huntsman. "You, who won your spurs from the august hand of Ulster, dare to turn your sword against him?"

"Kill all," shouted the knight hoarsely, drawing his keen blade. "Let not one escape alive."

Up to this time he had taken no part in the battle. But now, throwing aside his shield, and trusting to his mail of proof to guard him, he rode down upon the boar spears, shouting:

"Way there, forward; 'ware the talons of the eagle."

The king drew his blade, and pushing his horse to the front of the spears, opposed him boldly. There was something in his royal port, half-armed as he was, which struck the traitorous knight with terror, for he half retreated before those burning eyes. But that hesitation was only for a moment, and with a repetition of his battle-cry, he hurled himself upon the king.

"Now, felon!" cried the king; "welcome, welcome! Thou seest I have no helm, but, even as I am, I fear thee not. Take that for quittance of your claim against me!"

His bright blade flashed in the air and alighted upon the crest of the traitor with such stunning force that his helmet rung again, and he reeled blindly in his saddle. The king, with a fierce shout pressed on to complete his work, and the knight raised his blade feebly to ward off the blow, when a bow-string twanged loudly, and an arrow, aimed too truly, pierced the brave king through the brain. He reeled in his saddle, stretched out the hand which held his

sword, and then came crashing to the earth, dead before he reached the ground.

A wild, agonizing wail went up from the circle of spearmen as they saw the fall of the great king; the Irish keene for the dying!

Through all his broad land there were but few who had not loved the King of Ulster well, for his was a free and generous nature, giving honors and riches to those who were deserving, and that with no sparing hand. Now he lay dead, and the men who had defended him so nobly set up the keene for the king who was gone.

"Weep not for him, my heroes," cried the queen. "That we will do when vengeance is accomplished. Close around me, my brave ones. Let them know that your steel is true, for I am with you yet."

They responded gallantly, and for half an hour bore back the mail-clad men about them, although at each moment they dropped, man by man. Queen Ruda did not leave her horse; indeed, her eyes dwelt constantly upon the dead form of her noble husband, as he lay upon his back, his dark eyes open wide, and his strong right hand grasping the blade which in other days had done so much for Ulster.

"By all the gods!" cried the felon knight; shall huntsmen stand up thus? Archers, bend your bows, and care not if your arrows pierce her, woman though she be."

The two bands of archers, who, up to this time, had sent but one flight of arrows, and that the one which slew the noble king, at once prepared their bows, while the spearmen drew back a little, merely keeping the royal huntsmen at the points of their long spears, and saw them die, man by man, the knight looking coldly on, when he saw the queen start and clutch at the green velvet which covered her bosom; and then she sprung from her saddle, and staggered to the side of her dead husband.

"It is over, dear one," she whispered, falling on his breast. "At least I die upon your bosom, which hath been my shield for many a year."

The last of the huntsmen fell, and the dark massacre was over. Then the knight sprung from the saddle and slowly approached the bodies of those who had reigned in Ulster. Even now there was something awful in the presence of this royal pair, for the villain faltered as he came near.

The queen was not dead. Suddenly she started up, the blood-dripping arrow still fixed in her bosom, and looked at him with a wild stare.

"Wretch!" she cried. "Ye know well that from a race of prophets I have sprung. Listen to the words of a murdered queen—to the dying words of a woman whom you once loved, and now have murdered!"

"Accursed slave; the noble blood upon your soul will not be wiped away. Thou shalt reign in Ulster, but fate shall follow thee. Not a happy hour shalt thou know; thy child shall love thy worst enemy; the friends at thy board shall put poison in thy cup. All shall fear thee, but none love!"

"Silence, madwoman!" he hissed, savagely, "or by my faith I will cut you down."

"Not yet; the spirit of my old sires is strong upon me, and I see visions which only come to those who are near the portals of the grave. Woe, woe, woe to the race of Ulster! Cursed shall your name be, for you have slain a royal pair by vile treachery. In the midst of the domain he gave you, you have murdered him. Now, hear my parting curse."

"By the holy name of Bel, I will not. Who is there among all my men who will earn my lasting favor by striking this mad witch down?"

Not a man stirred. Cruel as they were, vile traitors and knaves, there was not one among them who would do this deed.

"My race shall not cease in Ulster," cried the queen. "My son, my son! He shall avenge the blood which was foully shed this day!"

She caught the arrow and tore it from her bosom, and fell dead upon her husband's breast. And then the felon band, satisfied that all were dead, crept away in silence, leaving the royal pair lying in their blood upon the trampled sod.

CHAPTER II.

REDMOND OF CLARE—THE LADY MARI—THE HUNTSMAN'S SAD NEWS.

"HEARD ye the words of that mad creature?" said the knight, turning to a henchman as they rode away; "she said that her son should rule in Ulster."

"Ay, mighty chief; I heard the words which she spoke," was the reply.

"And shall it be so, my friend? Shall this boy, whom I hate, sit upon the throne where his great father sat so long?"

"Not with my will," replied the henchman, knitting his dark brows. "I would have but one man king in Ulster, and that man is yourself. If you say so, there is naught against it."

"Not so fast, not so fast, good henchman. Of course you understand that this deed is not to be fastened upon us?"

"I do not see how it can be, great master. We were well disguised, and not a man of them escaped. Bah; you can do as you will."

"I shall not be king now, but among all the chiefs in Ulster, who so fit to be regent over the young king as his father's dear friend? Well, well, well. Ambition will do much, for as I live by bread, I never thought the hour would come when I would raise my hand against this great king. But hark you, henchman. Does it not seem to you that if this spawn of Satan, the young prince, were well out of the way—"

"Not yet," replied the henchman. "You must, for a short space, wear a mask to cover your great design. Once lull to sleep his suspicions, and all shall be well. In six months, if you are regent, you can so sway the people that they may of their own will proclaim you king."

"It may be," responded the knight, moodily. "But be that as it may, I cannot get the words of Queen Ruda out of my mind."

"She said that you should reign," answered the henchman.

"Ay, did she. But she said, moreover, that her son should be the one to cast me down. Her son; I would that he lay there beside them, with my dagger in his breast."

"Enough, great chief. The boy shall never reign in Ulster," was the confident answer.

Before the sun went down a body of armed men dashed through a village below a lofty castle. At their head rode a man of regal port, clad from head to heel in glittering mail. His helmet hung at his saddle-bow, and his long curling hair, falling upon his shoulders, gave him an appearance truly royal. This was Redmond, Earl of Clare, one of the most powerful of the many princes of Ireland. And well he might look royal, for he came of the strong race which went down before the arms of the sons of Miletus when they landed upon the green shores of Erin. Barefooted kernes ran up to take the horses, and the guards raised and lowered their spears as a welcome to their chief, for Redmond of Clare was known and loved by his men.

"Branner!" cried the earl, "make proclamation that the king and queen are hunting in the forest, and may come this way. Be ready to receive them with all honor, as is due to those whom Bel has made so royal."

He dismounted hastily and ran up the stairs which led to the main entrance. As he reached the first landing a beautiful girl, perhaps sixteen years of age, threw herself into his arms.

Well did Mari of Clare deserve the praise which was given her as the fairest maiden in the broad realm of Ulster. Though so young, she was womanly in stature, and her form was perfection itself. She had attired herself, that day, in the dress of a huntress, and no garb was better fitted to show off to advantage her beautiful figure. Over a kirtle of green velvet she wore a crimson bodice, slashed and embroidered with gold. Her limbs were clothed in leggings of fanciful pattern, and her slender ankles showed above her jeweled sandals. Upon her head she wore a hunting cap of green, decked with a single eagle-plume. Her lovely face, her wealth of clustering golden hair, and her sunny blue eyes, made her the toast of all the noble knights of Ulster; and even said that this fair girl was worthy to sit beside a king. Two years ago her mother had passed away from earth and since that time Redmond of Clare had given all his heart to his fair daughter.

"Welcome home, my father, welcome home," she said. "Ha; there is blood upon your gauntlet, and your mail is splashed with gore."

"Good faith, you have keen eyes, my sweet one. But the blood of the deer should not give you cause for fright," he answered, laughing.

"I fear not the sight of blood, dear father," she responded. "I can strike a deer as boldly as the best; but something, I know not what, made me tremble when I saw the blood upon your hand. But come; put off your armor, and I will bid the servitors prepare supper; for, after your hunt, your may well be hungry."

He went on to his own apartment and laid his armor by. When he had done this, and appeared in the rich dress of a Prince of Clare, he was a noble-looking man, tall, strong, and warlike. His face was dark, but cut in a haughty mold, and he looked like a man born to command. Scarcely had he laid his armor by and arranged his dress when the horn of the warder, sounding through the lofty halls, proclaimed that the feast was ready. He stepped down the long hall to the bower chamber of Lady Mari, and found her waiting. Taking her hand, he led her into the banquet hall, where the long table was spread; and two hundred knights and squires, who couched lance or swayed battle-ax at his command, waited the coming of their chief before they sat down. His seat was at the head, upon a sort of raised dais, upon which a smaller table was raised above the rest, at which Redmond and his daughter sat. As he stepped upon the dais, and the murmurs of applause had somewhat subsided, he placed Lady Mari in her seat and waved his hand to his knights to take their places, which they did in the order of merit. The table was spread with a profusion which was characteristic of the rude age in which they lived. It glittered with cups of gold and silver; great trenchers, bearing chimes of the wild boar;

haunches of venison and game birds were seen on every hand; huge beakers held the generous wine which all men drank at this age, and drank to excess, unless, indeed, they preferred the fiery usquebaugh, the favorite drink of the poorer classes of Ireland.

"Fall to!" cried Redmond as he took his seat. "All are welcome at the table of Redmond of Clare."

The servitors flew to execute the commands of their prince. Man by man the guests were served after the prince and Mari. At last, as the princess arose, Branner, the henchman stood up with a brimming goblet in his hand.

"Let all here do me right," he cried. "To the health of Lady Mari, the Flower of Clare."

All rose with shouts of applause and drank deep, and Mari left the hall, followed by her bower maidens. Then the flagon began to pass, and soon the sound of wild revelry was heard ringing through the lofty halls.

"Drink deep, sons of Clare," commanded the prince, as he waved his golden cup above his head. "Do me no wrong in your cups, but drink for the honor of our noble house. Ha! what clamor is that? Bid the knaves keep silence there!"

But the uproar continued, and there burst into the hall a man with matted hair and beard, his garments torn and disordered, and who panted for breath as if after a long run. His eyes searched the long hall until they rested upon the face of the prince, when he rushed forward, crying:

"Horror, horror, horror, great Clare! The king and queen lie in their gore in the great wood of Connel. Fifty huntsmen lie with them, for they fought for their lives."

The look of horror upon the face of Redmond was reflected upon those of his men.

"Hear me, oh, spirits," he cried. "I vow a sacrifice to you, and that sacrifice shall be the band of Connoc Moran, who have slain our good king. To the saddle, ye who are good men of your hands. Set forward the eagle banner; bid the harpers strike all the slumbering chords, and be the battle-word: 'Revenge for Connor and Ruda!'"

Instantly confusion rose in the castle, but it was the confusion of discipline, and in a remarkably short time a hundred men were in the saddle, the same hundred who had entered the castle with Redmond. A horse was provided for Clovis, the man who had brought the news of the massacre and who was a king's huntsman, and he was told to lead the way to the scene of slaughter. It was a short hour's ride, and at the end of that time, with torches gleaming in their hands, and all their armor glittering in the light, the hundred knights of Clare rode into the open space where lay the victims of that piteous massacre.

No sacrilegious hand had been laid upon the slain.

Ruda lay there as if asleep, her bright head pillowed upon the broad breast of her husband. All about them, as they had fallen that day, lay the forms of the noble huntsmen. At one place they lay piled in a heap as the flights of arrows had torn through them. They had died like men, for every one lay upon his back, and every face was frowning. For the men who died that day about King Connor were not common kernes, but men of renown, who had put on the huntsman's garb for that one day to chase the boar in the wood of Connel, and when Ulster knew the sad event there would be mourning in many a haughty home. For there lay the royal Chamberlain, the Captain of the Guard, Kenneth, Lord of Rory, and many a gallant man besides, steeped in gore.

"Oh, see, see!" cried Clovis. "Here is a noble fellowship of death. Here is that which will make many tears in Ulster. Oh, Connor, my king; oh, Ruda, kind and beautiful queen! I am only a poor man, but at least I may raise the keene above you, and the ulula shall sound o'er many a desolate hearth."

Redmond rode up and looked sternly down upon the bodies. Then he lighted from his steed and laid his hand upon the bosom of king Connor. Hardly had he done so when the blood began to flow from his wounds, and dropped slowly to the earth, and Clovis saw it. Though a poor man, he was an acute observer, and as he saw the eyes of Redmond look from him to the flowing blood, the thought came that Redmond of Clare was the cause of this great massacre. He knew, too, that Redmond suspected this belief, and that the suspicion would doom him to death.

"Whom do you suspect, Clovis?" demanded the prince. "Speak freely, without fear of the result."

"Who should it be but Connoc Moran, upon whose head outlawry hath been laid. Good sooth, I know his handiwork but too well."

"And know you where he harbors?"

"I would engage to lead you to the place in three hours' time; ay, and rouse him from his lair before the break of day. Connoc Moran was once my friend; but since he hath done this deed, may my hand wither when it is raised to help him in his hour of need."

"Thy suspicions rest upon the right person," declared Branner, the henchman.

the arrows of Connoc Moran's band, do you not? Then look at these."

He brought a sheaf of arrows, which he had taken from the ground near the spot where the huntsmen had grouped about their king. Clovis took them in his hand, and as he did so he started, for they were indeed the arrows of the band of Connoc Moran, the Outlaw of the Hills, a redoubted chieftain, who had his lair amid rocky glens, and made war upon Munster and Connaught, while he never lifted a hand against a man of Ulster. Men said that Connoc Moran had good reason to hate the men of Connaught, for they had done him wrong, when, a good knight, he had fought for their king. But lately, Connor, urged on by Connaught, had placed the ban upon his head, and declared him outlaw.

Clovis could not mistake the arrows of Connoc Moran's band. His followers had been chosen for their giant strength, and not a man among them but could bend a bow as strong as those borne by the men of merry England, while the Irish archers, as a rule, never drew the bowstring to the ear.

"It is true," declared Clovis. "If Connoc Moran has done this wrong, I swear that I will take no rest until I have slain him, in revenge for my murdered king."

Redmond was satisfied that the man no longer suspected him, and from that moment he was safe. They took up the bodies of the men of note, about fifteen in number, and laid them upon horses, and the sad procession moved back through the forest paths to the castle, while swift riders rode out, east, west north and south, to spread the news and call the people out for vengeance. And first of all rode Clovis, to tell his young master how his parents had fallen in the wood of Connel.

CHAPTER III.

ITH EOGAN.

CLOVIS made his way with all speed through mountain pass and boggy ground, until the towers of Ulster's capital, fair Emana, rose against the sky. As he rode men joined the race, for he shouted out the sad news as he passed. Cries of sorrow were heard on every side, for the sons of Ith were loved in Ulster, and Connor had been a good king, ruling by the strong hand, but ruling wisely and kindly. The voice of lamentation went with Clovis as he rode, and at last he passed the city gate and made for the palace of the king. Those were grand old days, and Irishmen may well be proud when they remember the heroes of old times.

"Where is the Lord of Cairnie; where is the Prince?" demanded Clovis.

"He is in the tilt-yard," replied a man who was lounging about in the court. "What would you with him?"

"Enough to make all Ulster mourn. The king and queen were slain in the wood of Connel, and their bodies are on the way from the castle of Redmond of Clare. Let me see the Prince."

He ran hastily through the great courts of the palace and reached the tilt-yard, where four strong knights were holding the lists against the brothers of the *Craobh Ruadh*, or Knights of the Red Branch, upon whom Ulster pinned her faith in hours of danger. Among all the noble bands which fought in the five kingdoms none were so bold or strong. The bloody hand, the emblem of the order, was always the sign of a valiant man, for none were admitted unless they had passed through a severe form of training from their youth up. At seven years old they commenced to learn the art of war, beginning with the cast of the javelin and the sling, and ending by the sway of the long lance, sword, and battle-ax.

Foremost among the challengers was one who bore upon his shield this device in the Irish tongue: "Glory is better than life." His shield, too, bore the device of the bloody hand, and above it the Ospray of Ulster. He was large of limb, and as he sat in his saddle he towered half a head above the best of the strong knights about him. As Clovis burst into the lists this knight, with another of the *Craobh Ruadh*, ran a course. The Red Branch Knight was fairly lifted from his saddle, and horse and man rolled in the dust, while the strong young knight, bearing his lance aloft, uninjured, rode on across the list, scarcely shaken in his saddle.

"Ith Eogan, Ith Eogan!" cried Clovis. "Listen to me, for I bring you sad news."

The young knight sprang from his saddle lightly, in spite of his heavy coat of mail, and threw up the visor of his helmet. He showed a face of pure Milesian type, with fair white brow and firm blue eyes. His cheek was smooth, and upon it the down of manhood had just begun to grow. He could not have been more than twenty-four years of age, but in all that constitutes a man, he was perfect.

"What wouldst thou, Clovis?" he asked, in a clear, musical voice. "If the tidings are bad, speak quickly, for I must know."

Clovis, without beating about the bush, told his news at once, and Ith Eogan covered his face for a moment, because it was a stain on knight-hood to show grief plainly before the eyes of

and when Ith Eogan again threw up his visor, none could have told that such a storm of passion had swept over his face.

"In the wood of Carmel say, you? Bayed like deer in the depth of the silent wood, ringed round by savage heathens. But hark you, my Clovis. You had used to own keen eyes, and can you say who has done this fatal deed?"

"Prince Redmond says that Connoc Moran did this cruel act," was the reply of the huntsman.

"And why should Connoc be accused of this? I have heard of him as a good knight, who would not do a base act to save his life. No, no, no; it is false. Connoc Moran did not kill my father."

"Who then, if it was not he? The arrows which we found came from the strong bows of Connoc Moran's men; we have none other in Ulster who could have drawn his bows."

"Connoc Moran would not do it," persisted Ith Eogan, sternly. "I marvel at you, oh Clovis, that you should accuse a noble man."

"I accuse him not," replied Clovis. "Prince Redmond of Clare is the man who accuses him, not I."

"Prince Redmond, ha!" muttered Ith, with a moody brow. "Redmond of Clare, who would like right well to reign in Ulster; the man my father loved so well that he made him second in his kingdom, and yet—"

The young Prince paused, and cast his eyes upon the faces of the knights around him. On all those faces there was a look of indecision and doubt, and Ith Eogan saw that the Knights of the *Craobh Ruadh* were balancing in their minds the chances of the coming changes in the kingdom.

"Cairnie," cried the prince, "take a cath* of men and march. Bear with you a chariot large enough to carry the bodies of my slaughtered parents. If you meet the prince upon the way join your command to his and return. Say to Prince Redmond that I thank him in that he hath taken those noble bodies in his charge."

"Stay, Cairnie," said Clovis, in a melancholy voice. "Know you who lay dead at the feet of your great king?"

The knight turned quickly.

"Speak," he said.

"Your brother, Feargus. Do not weep for him, for he died like a man, with his weapons in his hands. Face to the foe was Feargus; he died grim!"

"So would I die, so may all my brothers die, with their harness on," cried the knight. "But hear me; I swear by my knightly faith, by my hopes of the hereafter, by the bones of my fathers, that I will take no rest until I know who hath slain my youngest brother. And when he is found, the *Craobh Ruadh* will know how to avenge him."

He sprang into the saddle and rode away at full speed. Soon the sound of preparation was heard, and there marched forth three thousand men on the road to Clare, men of the best of the militia of Ulster, their grim faces showing fierce under their iron caps. Pikes, swords and axes were the arms they bore, and no more soldierly men ever trod the earth than those who marched under the banner of the *Teagh Míle*.† Thus they set forth, and as the sun went down they came again, bearing back their dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE royal pair were in their graves, and the Council of Munster met in the Hall of Audience.

In that Council were the best and bravest men in Ulster, those who loved the race of Ith, and preferred to see one of that race on the throne, and some who would have gladly seen the crown and scepter fall into another house.

Ith Eogan was there, but, as yet, he could not be king of Ulster. The Irish law forbade that any man, no matter how brave or noble, should sit upon any of the five thrones, unless he had reached the full age of twenty-five years, and Ith yet lacked a year of his majority. There, in the Council, sat Redmond of Clare, with his dark, handsome face turning from side to side, watching his chance like the tiger preparing for his spring.

At last the chief of the Council, an old man with a flowing white beard, rose in his seat and addressed the assembly:

"Brothers," he said, "we meet for an important purpose. Our great king who is gone hath ruled Ulster well and wisely for twelve long years, but fate hath cut him off. We are here to choose one to take his place, and should our laws allow it, I would say, let Ith Eogan, the son of Connor, sit upon the throne his father filled so wisely. But no man who hath not attained full age may do this, and Ith Eogan must wait."

"Let me speak a word, wise Cormac," said Ith, rising in his place, amid murmurs of applause from his partisans. "Think not that I wish to break the law. I cannot sit upon the throne of Ulster, and here I swear that whoever holds the place, I will give him my support

* 3,000 men.

if only he makes me his *Righ-Damhna*.* I ask this as my right, and if it is granted, I, and all my party, will bend the knee to the king, and swear, while he lives we will not conspire against him, and will uphold his honor under sword and shield."

The building shook under the tumultuous applause as the Prince took his seat, and the old leader again rose.

"Well and wisely hast thou spoken, oh Ith Eogan; well and wisely, like a true Prince of Ulster. All who have followed thy father should remember that thy race have ruled long in Ulster, and have ruled well. What you demand is your right, seeing that you have but a year to wait, before, with a strong party at your back, you could lay claim to the kingdom. But this would lead to war, and we would have peace with all men, if peace could come with honor. Who, then, shall reign in Ulster, and make Ith Eogan his *Righ-Damhna*?"

"I name one for the throne," cried Ith Eogan, gaining his feet first. "Let Cormac, the Wise, he who hath just spoken, wield the scepter in Ulster."

Before the applause which greeted this nomination had subsided, another man was on his feet, and that man was Branner, the henchman of Prince Redmond.

"When men grow old," he said, in a soft voice, "it is time for them to lay aside the robes of state, and leave the work to younger hands. Cormac, the man of many battles, would, in his time, have made a noble ruler in Ulster. But Cormac, old, feeble, ready to drop into his grave, is not the man who should take this place. No, brothers; I will name a name which is mighty in war and council, the name of a man whom the king loved well, whose arm is strong in battle, whose brain works wonders in the council, and whom the Craobh Ruadh will follow to the death. I speak of Redmond of Clare, the best and the bravest of the Knights of the Craobh Ruadh."

The applause which followed this nomination was greater, if possible, than that which met the name of Cormac. It was a warlike age, and most of the council would have preferred a man who could lead their forces in battle; and, although Cormac was beloved, they knew that he could no longer wield battle-axe or sword, while Redmond was a grim champion, worthy of the days in which he lived. Ith Eogan again sprung to his feet.

"I would not speak against a man who is of my blood, but Cormac is my choice. Why, if Cormac is king, cannot Redmond of Clare and Ith Eogan lead you on to battle as bravely as if the king himself were at the head? No, brethren, let Cormac the Wise be our king."

"Down, murderer, parricide!" cried Branner the henchman. "Murderer of thy father, and assassin of thy mother, hide thy guilty head."

Under this terrible accusation Ith Eogan started as if a spear-head had pierced his bosom. He stared at Branner as one in a dream, for never in the course of his life had he been accused of any crime. But Branner only returned the gaze in a quiet way, as a man who knew his position, and was ready to maintain it.

"Am I mad?" demanded Ith Eogan. "Did I hear thy words aright, Left-handed Branner?"

"I spoke loudly that all here might understand," was the reply. "I called thee murderer, and murderer thou art. I called thee parricide, for if thy hand did not deal the blow, the hands of thy minions did it."

"Princes and Lords of Ulster," rung out the voice of Ith Eogan. "Not often is such a stain as this cast upon the head of a prince of a mighty house. You have known me long, and if you believe me guilty, let me die the death. I might claim my right to fight thee, Left-handed Branner, and thou canst say whether thy sword is sharp enough to cope with mine. But no; though I might conquer thee, if I were guilty, my own heart would condemn me. Bring forward thy proofs, Branner; let the council judge."

"Here then, I lay them down," replied Branner. "Clovis, the huntsman of King Connor, came to the Castle of Clare while we sat at the banquet, and said that King Connor and Queen Ruda lay dead in the wood of Connel. We took horse and rode, and there found them, as you know right well, and all about them fifty gallant men, who, with nothing but their silken suits to fence their breasts, had fallen one by one before the arrows of the men of Connoc Moran. Here are the arrows, and you can judge if any other men could draw their bows."

The sheaf of arrows which had been picked up in the fatal wood were passed through the assembly, and all the warriors knew them.

"This is well," said Cormac, the Wise. "We all know that these are the arrows of Connoc Moran, but this is no proof that Ith Eogan had aught to do with it."

"I have not finished yet, Wise Cormac," replied Branner. "Ere the good king went down he had cloven to the jaws a man in armor. Upon the body of this man the huntsmen had fallen in heaps, and fearing pursuit, Moran had left him there and fled in haste. We took the

armor from this man and knew him for Tig Deane, the son of Connoc Moran. Searching his body, we found this letter, written in a clerkly hand. Let one of the learned doctors read it to the council."

He took out a bloody piece of parchment and gave it to Cormac, the Wise, who was learned in the laws of Ireland. He rose, and opening the bloody sheet read it aloud:

"To the High and Mighty Knight, Connoc Moran, in his hold in the hills, this by the hand of Clovis, the son of Eion—greeting:

"Since the King of Connaught hath declared you outlaw you have held him back bravely with lance and arrow. He hath wrought upon the King of Ulster until he hath put the ban upon you. The king hath done wrong, and you by right are now his enemy. Would that Ith Eogan were king and Connoc Moran should hold only the second place in his kingdom, and not all the power of Connaught should do him wrong. When we have enemies, we strike; he is but a fool who lets his foeman pass, when his own hand can claim revenge. On the third day hence the king and queen, with but fifty men in hunting-suits, pass through the wood of Connel. Before the sun goes down, they will rest in the opening where stands the Druid monument, above the grave of Tchar. If I know thee well, when the sun hath sunk an hour, Connor will no longer be King of Ulster, and Ith Eogan will be *Righ-Damhna* to a new king. Ith Eogan will be his right hand, and the ban of outlawry shall be taken from Connoc Moran. In a year hence, Ith Eogan will be king. Let Connoc Moran ponder these things well and be wise."

The doctor paused and folded the parchment, while a strange shiver passed through the Council. Although the parchment was not signed, all felt that but one name could be set below it, and that name Ith Eogan. Branner waved his hand to signify that his proof was before them, and then sat down.

"You have said too much or too little," cried Ith Eogan. "Call Clovis, and let us hear his testimony."

Search for Clovis was made, but he could not be found. He had been seen to ride out of the gates a few minutes before, and had not returned.

"He hath fled," declared Branner. "When I called Ith Eogan parricide, Clovis was in the hall, but from that time I have not seen him. Speak, Eogan: dare you deny your guilt?"

"Deny it! Ay; a thousand times, ay! If this hand which I raise on high, ever penned the words which have been read, may that hand wither. I swear by my knightly word, by my vow of chivalry, by all my earthly hopes, that I never loved my father better than upon the day when he rode out of Emana with his gallant train behind him. I never loved my noble mother better than when she gave me her hand to kiss at parting. Think you I would have pressed my lips upon that hand if I had this evil in my heart?"

"My son," said Cormac, "it is hard to think that you could be guilty of this thing, but the proof is heavy. Do you demand the combat?"

"The combat! You should know by this time, that there is not a man in this broad land, nay, not two or three, before whose weapons I would give back a pace. But I do not believe that because my arm is stronger than that of Left-handed Branner, it proves me innocent of crime. Or, if I chance to stumble, or my sword break in my hand, or a lucky blow should slay me, I do not believe that proves me guilty."

Cormac, for the first time, began to look at him sternly. Like all old men of that day he was a little inclined to be superstitious, and of all things he believed that a man who engaged in a combat for the right must win the battle. While he gazed upon Eogan sternly, the low murmur rose into a roar of fury, and axes, swords and spears gleamed in the light, and a hundred men, with fury in their looks, turned upon the young Prince.

"Down with the parricide! To death with the murderer!" was their cry.

Ith Eogan turned and faced the raging crowd, his arms folded on his broad breast, and his hair floating back upon the wind. He never flinched as the forest of spears were leveled at his breast, and twenty axes were raised high in air.

CHAPTER V.

KING REDMOND—CONNOC MORAN'S DEFIANCE.

It seemed for the moment as if nothing could save the life of the Prince.

Yet, so gallant was his bearing, so bold the look of his flashing eye, that many whose hands were raised to strike drew back before his glance.

"Why do ye hesitate?" he cried, sternly. "Ith Eogan will not raise a hand to save his innocent life. If my people, the people of Emana and Ulster, who have known me from a child, believe that I have done this deed, I am not fit to live."

But that moment's hesitation saved him. Even while the hoarse murmur were growing louder, a dozen armed men broke through the circle and formed a ring about the Prince, with their axes and swords ready. They were some of the immediate adherents of Ith Eogan, who would have fought for him readily in any

cause; but more quickly in this, because they believed him innocent. Others took sides and the Council parted, over a hundred men on either side, every man, except Ith Eogan and Cormac, with a weapon in his hand. Some had merely drawn in self-defense, without any intention of fighting unless attacked. Among these was Prince Redmond, who stood leaning upon his long sword, watching the movements in the hall with the eye of a master.

"Hark you, Redmond of Clare," cried Ith Eogan, "will you stand as champion for your henchman, the man who accuses me? Do it, if you dare, and I will fight."

"Why do you single me out?" was the reply. "In what have I done thee wrong?"

"You knew this villainy, and in your sly way, have urged it forward. I tell you, Redmond of Clare, that if you dare affirm that I leagued with Connoc Moran or any other man to murder my dear parents, you lie in your teeth. There is my glove; take it up, an you will."

"Silence all," cried Cormac. "You hear the challenge of the Prince, Redmond of Clare. Do you take up his gage?"

"No," was the stern answer. "Not willingly will I cross blades with a parricide, but I will send my *brach* to fight him, if you will, and the dog shall win the day."

Upon that ground Redmond of Clare may decline the combat. Only, if his champion fail, he must bear the blame of having wrongfully accused a noble knight," said Cormac.

"I will fight with Redmond, and with Redmond only," replied the Prince.

"Then I cast thee off. Cursed be the hour when thou wast born, Ith Eogan. The mother who bore thee was good and beautiful; thy father was firm and wise. Strange, indeed, that from the eyrie of the eagle such a kite should spring. Out of thine own mouth I condemn thee, and thy death shall be as terrible as even thy worst enemy could wish. Away with him, and cast him into the lowest dungeon of the castle of Emana until the will of the Council is known."

"Not while we can lift the sword," cried one of the friends of the Prince. "We will not have it so."

"Fiachra," replied Ith Eogan, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the speaker, "thou art a true friend, but in this thou doest great wrong. The laws of Ulster are just and right, and whoso offends them, let him suffer for his crime. Wise Cormac believes that I have done an evil deed. He is deceived; but what of that? Here I give myself to him freely, and let no man raise a hand in my defense."

Even his friends could see that he was right, and as one man they gave back before him, and he advanced toward Redmond. That subtle prince drew back, and would have raised his sword, but a hiss of scorn about him caused him to lower his weapon.

"You have worked your will, Redmond of Clare," the Prince said. "All this evil hast thou done to sit upon the throne of Ulster. But I may say to you that though you may gain your end and reign for a time, yet the day will come when Ith Eogan will sit upon his father's throne. I give myself prisoner to you; obey the orders of Cormac."

"A guard there, ho!" cried Redmond.

A hundred men, armed only with spears, appeared at the entrance to the hall, and the captain entered the room with four sergeants at his back.

"*Fear Comhlan Cead*,"* said Redmond, "you will take the Prince Ith Eogan to the castle dungeons and put him under ward. See to it, on your head, that he does not escape."

"On my head be it, Prince of Clare," replied the officer. "But I will not lay my hand upon a royal child unless he gives consent."

"It shall not need, Fear Comhlan," responded Ith Eogan. "I will go with thee without question, and on my oath of chivalry I will not attempt to escape between this and my dungeon."

He turned his haughty glance slowly about the vast room, and there was no flinching in his eye. On the contrary, there was a cold smile upon his set, firm face. He marched away, and all men felt a shudder pass through them at the thought of this brave Prince immured in the dungeons of Emana.

"Enough," said Cormac. "The seven will meet after the king is crowned and pass judgment upon the guilty. Speak, now, and say who shall rule in Ulster."

Now that there was no hope for Ith Eogan, the second choice of nearly every man was Redmond of Clare; for, after all, he was a good knight, and worthy, as far as prowess went, to do good work in battle-field. The almost unanimous voice of the council called Redmond to the throne. Of course this action must be ratified by the Council of the five kingdoms in Meath, but that would be merely a matter of form, since without bloodshed the Prince had gained the throne.

But the men of Ulster did not wait. The king was crowned and took his place upon the throne, and Mari was Princess of Ulster, and heir to the throne if none of the male line should

* Commander of one hundred.

* Hair-presumptive

be born. But Mari did not seem happy. She had heard that her cousin, whom she had never seen, although she had often heard of him as a bold and accomplished youth, lay in chains in the lower depths of the castle, under strong watch and ward. Twice she tried to see him, but the Comblan Cead was proof against all enticements. One day Redmond, with a gloomy brow, sought her out.

"Now by Bel the mighty, Princess Mari, why do you seek to look upon this outlawed traitor; this murderer of his kindred?"

"I would see his face, my father the king," replied Mari. "If I once looked upon it I would know if he were guilty. I have heard the name of Ith Eogan blazoned through the land with honor. I have heard men say that since the days of Ith the Strong no man of his name could wield his sword or bear his shield so bravely. And it seemeth strange to me, my king, that such a man should do so base a deed."

"To thy bower, foolish one," answered the king. "There rest with thy maidens, and have no thought of the work of men. How now, Branner; what news dost thou bring?"

Branner glanced at Mari, and waited until she had departed, making a low obeisance to her father, but returning the salutation of Branner with a haughty glance. She had never liked the left-handed henchman. There was something in his dark face which she did not understand, and it seemed to her that he hid in his heart some dark purpose, toward which he was slowly creeping.

"Now that the Princess is gone, Branner, you can speak your mind. You have something to tell me?"

"Ay! know you the inselence of that vile outlaw, Connoc Moran?"

"What inselence?" demanded Redmond.

"When I left my room in the castle this morning, I found a scroll pinned upon my door with a sharp dagger. I took it to a clerk, for I know naught of letters. When you have read it, you will be as wrathful as I."

Redmond took the scroll. He had some clerkly skill, and could read manuscript readily enough, and this was written in a plain hand.

"To Redmond of Clare, falsely called King of Ulster, I, Connoc Moran, Knight of the Clasp'd Hands, champion of the faith of Christ, send greetings."

"I have been chased from my own land because, when in Rome, I learned the faith of the Christian, and the Druids hate me. I am a man, and since first knightly spurs were given me, I have never done a deed for which I had cause to blush. In the last Council of Ulster, Ith Eogan, true *Righ-Damhna* of Ulster, and a gallant knight, was accused upon the evidence of a lying scroll with the murder of the good King Connor and Royal Ruda, and the scroll said that my men, brave and knightly though they be, assailed and murdered fifty unarmed huntsmen; armed at every point, we murdered them!"

"It is false! Ith Eogan never wrote to me, never saw me in his life, to his knowledge, and Clovis was a true king's man. Here I throw down my gage to any man in Ulster, but first to Left-handed Branner. Him I defy to mortal combat, and upon his body I will prove him a most foul traitor. And if the king will lay his sacred majesty aside, and meet me in battle, I will prove that he is perjured, and that Ith Eogan hath been falsely accused."

"Give me safe conduct, under the pledge of your knightly oath, oh king, and even at Emana I will prove that the words I speak are true. Seek not to hide this missive, for one hath been sent to Cormac, to the commander of the *Craobh Ruadh*, and to many more. For your life, oh king, you dare not refuse me this demand."

"To this I set my name."

"CONNOC MORAN."

A savage cry burst from the lips of Redmond. "What say you, oh king," demanded Left-handed Branner; "must this demand be complied with?"

"Dare you meet him?"

"Ay; I fear no man who treads the green earth," replied the henchman, proudly.

"Go then and prepare. But first send Cormac to me, and let me counsel with him. Trust me, Branner, I will make him think that there is no evil in my heart against Ith Eogan, but I will so urge him that the Prince shall be no more when Connoc Moran comes to Emana. Away."

In a short time he was joined by Cormac. The face of the old man showed perplexity, and he held in his hand an open scroll, which he placed in the hand of King Redmond. It was couched in somewhat different language from the one which he had just read, but made the same demand.

"What know you of Connoc Moran, oh Cormac?" asked the king.

"A gallant knight, and a man without reproach, save that he hath taken to this new faith, which he hath learned in Rome."

"What do you say to this demand?"

"That you cannot well refuse it. The people will insist that he who claims the right of combat shall be permitted to purge himself from stain."

Redmond sat for a moment in silence, beating the floor with his jeweled sandal. Then he raised his head.

"Branner is ready for the battle," he said, at last. "Make proclamation in my name, and upon the faith of my kingly word and knightly

honor, that if Connoc Moran will come to Emana, he shall have a free field in which to fight, and liberty to go if he win the battle."

"You have chosen well, oh king. The proclamation shall be made. And now, what shall be done with Ith Eogan? If Connoc Moran wins the battle, it also clears him from stain."

"Not so, not so. A man can only purge himself."

"You are wrong in this, oh king. Connoc Moran fights for Ith Eogan, as well as for himself."

"Well, well, well; the doctors of law must decide that. Let the proclamation be made."

Cormac left the audience chamber, and the king, with a low anathema, called aloud for a man who had followed him for many years, known as Fear'd Connor. The two were in close conference for half an hour, and then Fear'd Connor went forth, with a grim look upon his dark face.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE.

THE king called a messenger and demanded where Cairnie, commander of the *Craobh Ruadh*, was to be found.

The messenger quickly returned, and said that the general was in the ante-chamber, and awaited an audience.

"Let him enter," said Redmond. "I would see him at once."

The chief entered, as Cormac had done, with an open parchment in his hand.

"Thou hast no need to show that parchment, chief," said the king. "It seems that Connoc Moran hath friends in Emana."

"More than dare speak, King Redmond," replied the chief, who, as a general of the *Craobh Ruadh*, ranked only second to the king in Ulster, and was bold even in his presence. "The Christian faith gains strength in secret, and throws down the gods we have worshiped, one by one. But what say you; must Connoc Moran have his will?"

"I see no remedy."

"Nor do I. I am glad if he can prove the falsehood of this accusation, for it is hard to think that Ith Eogan would do this deed of evil."

"Ith Eogan is still in ward?"

"He is," replied Cairnie.

"Here is my warrant and my signet. Go you to the dungeon, release him from ward, and bring him before me."

Cairnie took the ring and hurried from the presence of the king. In a short time he returned, followed by Ith Eogan. The chains had been stricken off, and the Prince walked with painful steps, for he was not used to bonds. Even now he recognized crowned majesty, no matter how the crown was gained, and gave to Redmond the salutation due him.

"Not to Redmond of Clare, but to the majesty of Ulster, do I bow the knee," he declared, proudly. "What is your will with me?"

"You have found a champion, Ith Eogan. Connoc Moran claims the accusation against you a lie, and is ready to prove it under shield. This being so, you must not lie in ward, but shall go free, giving your knightly word not to leave Emana, or at least the kingdom until the battle has been fought."

"By my faith, King Redmond," responded Ith Eogan, "I looked not for so much grace from you. I thank you and give my promise."

"Pursuivant," cried the king, "the apartments of the Prince are his again. Herald, make proclamation that Ith Eogan is free, for this time at least, until the battle hath been fought. I appoint the time seven days hence, upon the open plain outside the city. May Bel give strength to the true man's arm."

"God defend the right!" rung out a hollow voice. "Bel hath no power."

All started, and looked from side to side, to see who had dared blaspheme the god of the Druids.

"Who spoke?" demanded the king, fiercely. "Who dares speak the name of the Christian's God within the palace of Emana?"

No one answered and dead silence reigned in the place, as each man held his breath. The Christian religion had not yet taken strong hold upon the Irish people, but as Cairnie said, it gained strength day by day in secret. A Druid, who sat behind the king, came forward with a dark look upon his face.

"Beware, oh king," he said. "The men of this new faith work in the dark, and slowly but surely they undermine our temples. Let this base wretch be found, and sacrificed upon the altar which waits him."

But the search was vain. No one in the assembly knew aught of the strange voice, and the herald went out into the streets, making his proclamation loudly. Instantly a great tumult rose in the city, and soon a great multitude of all classes surrounded the castle; their shouts rent the air, and it was known that they called for Ith Eogan.

"Show thyself," said the king. "The people call for thee."

In his secret heart Redmond had a hope that when Ith Eogan appeared before the people, they would tear him in pieces. The brave

Prince, too, had his doubts, but he stepped out, followed by a number of his friends, each of whom had his hand upon his sword. As the Prince, his yellow hair floating in the breeze, stepped out upon the broad marble steps which led to the great gate of the palace, he saw before him a vast multitude, swaying to and fro like the waves of the sea. As this kingly man came out in full view, a wild cry went up, but it was not a cry of hatred. No, it was joy to see the idolized son of their good king again free, and in all that vast assembly there was not one whose voice was not raised in a delighted cry. Feathered caps were tossed in the air, swords gleamed, and not a voice was heard in honor of King Redmond. The tumult was quickly hushed when the Prince spoke, thanked them for their expressions of sympathy, and dismissed them. Then he turned back into the palace, and again entered the presence of the king.

"Am I free to come and go at my will?" he demanded.

"Free as air," replied the king. "Only remember the word you have pledged to me."

"There is no need to remind me of that," replied the Prince. "I never broke my word yet to friend or enemy, and I never will. Have I permission to retire to my own apartments?"

"As you will."

He again saluted the king, and retired. At the doors of his apartments he found the guard which was his by right, who saluted him, and opened a way for him to pass through. All his old servants were in their places, and he was accompanied into his apartments by Fiachra, the friend who had drawn the sword for him in the Council Hall. They sat for a while in close converse, and then Fiachra went out, leaving the Prince alone. For a while he sat in deep thought, and then stepped to the window and looked out. His apartments opened toward the fairest portion of Ulster. Green hills, dotted with grazing cattle and sheep, lay before him. Silver streams ran down from the mountains, sparkling in the sunrays.

"'Tis a fair land," he murmured. "None but the race of Ith ought to possess it, and none ever shall."

He turned to the marble table which stood behind him, poured out a glass of wine, and raised it to his lips. As he did so a hollow voice sounded through the apartment.

"Beware! Touch not the poisoned cup, oh, Prince of Ulster."

Ith Eogan dropped the cup upon the stone floor and looked about him in astonishment. There was no one in the room and no one was in the ante-chamber when he opened the door, and the Prince was astonished beyond measure. Was the wine poisoned? He took up a manchet of bread which lay upon the table, broke off a piece, soaked it in the wine, and began to throw pieces of the bread to some doves fluttering about the broad cornices. The birds fluttered down and began to eat the crumbs, and the Prince watched them. Ten minutes passed, and the doves, which were now seated upon the ledges of the windows, began to fall off one by one. They were dead; the poison had done its work.

"Thanks, invisible friend," said the Prince, in a loud voice. "Thou hast saved my life."

He poured out more of the wine and tossed it from the window. Shortly after the door opened, and Cormac came in and greeted the young man kindly. The Prince informed him of what had happened, and the face of the old man grew graver yet.

"Danger hedges thee in, Ith Eogan," he said, "but thou hast friends still."

"It would seem so. Whoever would have murdered me will think I am proof against poison when the half-empty bottle is found. Did you hear that strange voice in the audience-chamber?"

"I did," answered Cormac.

"The warning I received came from the same voice."

"It was passing strange," responded Cormac. "However, be on your guard, for deadly enemies hedge you round about."

The old man remained for some time in the apartment, and night was closing in when he went out. The Prince retired early, for he was worn out by his imprisonment, and his soft couch looked very inviting to him. Scarcely had he touched the couch when he was asleep.

The midnight hour came, and a silence as of death fell upon the sleeping castle. At times the call of the guards could be heard, but nothing more. Sleep held all in its clutches, and Ith Eogan slumbered like the dead.

The bell in the tower had sounded the stroke of twelve.

Suddenly, without warning, a stone in the wall slipped aside and a narrow opening was seen, wide enough, however, to admit the body of a man.

Through this opening a dark-robed form stole into the chamber.

The faint light of the lamp fell upon a gleaming blade in his right hand, and with a cat-like step he approached the sleeping Prince.

He lay upon the couch with his noble breast exposed to the light. One strong white arm had

thrown off the coverlet, and the play of his sloping muscles was revealed. His broad bosom was exposed, and as he lay there no more perfect specimen of manly beauty could have been conceived. But that dark man who crept into the room had not come to feast his eyes upon that manly form.

Murder was in his heart. As he bent over the bed his eyes sought the best place upon the exposed bosom upon which to strike the blow, for he had come there to kill. The savage glitter in his eyes would have told that, if the long knife in his hand had not shown the fact more fully. The failure of the poison had been followed by another attempt, more certain than the first.

He drew nearer to the bed, until he stood close beside it. The long arm was lifted and the light of the lamp fell upon the bright blade of the dagger as it began to fall.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEAD ASSASSIN—A GALLANT DEED.

As morning broke, the tiring man of the Prince entered his apartment.

As he approached the bed he gave a cry of horror, for there, in a ghastly heap beside the bed, lay the body of a man, dead for some hours. This man held in his hand a murderous-looking dagger, which it was plain he had meant to use upon the sleeping Prince. They tore the mask from his face, and saw that it was Feard Connor, the bowman, who had been so long in the service of King Redmond, and a foster-brother of Left-handed Branner, the henchman.

At the cry of his tiring man the Prince awoke, and for the first time saw the form upon the floor.

"Ha!" he cried. "Who is this?"

"One who came to do murder, mighty Prince. Did you kill him?"

"Not I, Nadori, not I. Since I lay down to sleep my slumbers have not been broken. Dress me quickly; be in haste, for I must look to this."

He robed himself quickly, sprung out of bed, and approached the fallen man. There did not appear to be any wound upon him, but upon a closer examination a portion of the skull was found to be shattered as if by a terrible blow. Just then Eogan set his foot upon some hard substance, and stooping, he picked up a ball of lead, weighing perhaps half a pound. Such a ball as this was used in the Irish sling, and sometimes did great execution.

"I give thanks to my unknown friend," declared the Prince. "Twice in one day he hath saved my life. What is the noise I hear outside, my friend?"

"They say that Connoc Moran and his men are near at hand, and the people are eager to see the great hero."

"Indeed; call in the guard."

The man ran to the door, and two of the guards came, who started wildly at the sight of the dead ruffian.

"Take away this carrion," commanded the Prince. "So perish all who lift a hand against one of royal blood."

The men took up the body and carried it away, and the young Prince, wearing a shirt of mail, but without gauntlets or helmet, and a hat with a long plume floating down upon his shoulders, came out into the corridor. As he did so, the king, attended by his nobles, passed out of the royal apartments on his way to the audience chamber.

"I give you good morrow, fair Prince," he said. "I hope you have rested well."

"As well as a man may who is threatened by poison and steel. But both these have passed me by, and you see me safe."

"What mean you, Prince?" demanded the king, with a look of astonishment. "Poison, steel! This to me, in my own castle?"

"I know not if you had a hand in it, King Redmond. Enough that my wine was poisoned, and in the dead of night the foster-brother of Branner the henchman sought my life."

"Bring him before me. By my father's spirit, the dog shall die the death," cried Redmond.

"No need to call him, for you would only cry to deaf ears. The bloody dog is dead," replied Ith Eogan.

"He is well punished, then. Come, fair Prince; the banquet awaits us."

Ith Eogan shook his head. "I crave your pardon," he said, "but I have much to do, for I hear that the brave man who hath named himself my champion is on the march, and I must go out and meet him."

He strode out of the hall and went to the armory, and there met his henchman. In a short time, he came out into the court, where a dozen young knights of the Craobh Ruadh, similarly attired, were waiting to accompany him. Ten minutes later they rode out of the court-yard and took the road which led to the borders of Munster. The only banner which was borne was that of Ith Eogan, an Ospray soaring through an azure field. They saw mounted men spurring on from all points, and soon a herald came up at full gallop, a man who bore upon his arm the insignia of the house of Moran, two clasped hands.

"I cry you mercy, good herald," said the

Prince, "but where may we meet your noble master?"

"He comes by the river, sir knight," replied the man. "If you go to meet him you will be received right heartily, as a true and courteous knight should be."

"Take this for guerdon, herald," said Ith Eogan, detaching a rich chain from his neck. "Forward, forward, my knights; let us meet brave Connoc Moran."

They spurred their horses along the shining river at a round trot. The breeze lifted their floating plumes, the grass was green and sweet, birds sung, and Ith Eogan felt more and more the pride of birth and love of country.

Suddenly, without warning of any kind, they heard the thunder of swift hoofs, and saw a mad horse, the foam flying from his bleeding lips and nostrils, rushing across the plain. On his back, holding her seat valiantly, was a fair lady. Though she could no more control the steed then if her rein had been pack-thread, yet she did not seem to quail, and strove with all her feeble strength to curb the flying animal. With a quick movement the young Prince covered his face with his visor, and signing to his companions to give place, bounded from the saddle, and flung himself in the way of the fast-moving steed. There was something so imposing in the manner of the Prince, that although the mad creature dashed on as if he did not see the immovable figure in his track, there was a perceptible swaying in his gait, as if that bold front had made him waver in his course.

Still it seemed as if this thunderbolt must crush down and trample under foot the gallant man who blocked his way.

Suddenly, as if imbued with new life, his speed was accelerated, and he came flying down upon the young knight.

"Back, Prince," cried Fiachra. "Let us meet him all at once."

"No names, Fiachra, unless I choose to speak; remember that my title is dead and buried. No, no; I need no help."

On rushed the flying steed, and as he came near enough, the strong left arm of Eogan shot out and caught him by the muzzle closing upon it with a gripe of steel. Then, throwing all the strength of his mighty loins and shoulders into the effort, he actually checked the mad beast in his rapid flight. It was time, for he was rushing straight toward the brink of a dark cliff, down which he would have plunged a moment later. The strong right hand at the same time caught the lady, lifted her from the saddle, and placed her on the green sod.

Then began a battle royal between man and beast.

The horse reared and plunged, struck out with his fore feet, and made every effort to break the hold of that strong hand upon his muzzle. But, with his right hand free Eogan caught the right fore leg of the horse just above the fetlock, lifted it from the earth and held it in a firm clasp.

For half an hour the horse struggled furiously, but Ith Eogan never broke his hold. At last, trembling in every limb, the strong steed gave out, and lay upon his side, panting, conquered. Eogan made him rise, kneel, curvet, gallop, advance, retire, and go through all the evolutions of a war horse, while he stood with folded arms, not laying a hand upon him.

"Now, fair lady," he declared, "I give you back your steed. And from this hour a thread will be strong enough to rein him."

Up to this time he had not looked fully at the maiden, and did not know who she was. But now he saw Mari, Princess of Ulster, in all her fresh young beauty, her golden hair flying back on the passing breeze, and her blue eyes looking heaven into his own.

"Fair sir," she said, "I am the daughter of King Redmond. I shame to say that I do not know the faces of all the noble gentlemen who ring around the throne, but although your face is hidden, something tells me that you came of noble blood."

"I have taken a vow that I will not show my face," he replied. "I pray you, pardon me."

"At least give me your name."

"My name I cannot give," he answered. "It is enough that one day you shall know it, for you and I must meet again, oh Princess. Fiachra, turn back with this royal lady, and see that she reaches Emana safely. But keep my secret well, Fiachra."

He gave his hand to assist the Princess to remount, which she quickly did, giving him a piercing glance from the depths of her glorious eyes.

"Then you will not give your name, sir knight?" she asked.

"I cannot, sweet Princess, at least not now; but one day you shall know it. This is the noble Fiachra, Lord of Lena. He will guard you safe to Emana."

She gave her horse the rein and was gone, waving her hand in mute farewell. Fiachra rode by her side, and together they passed down the valley, while the Prince, with a sad look in his face, slowly mounted his steed.

"Ill fortune comes not singly to any man," he murmured. "I have seen the one woman I

could love, and she is the daughter of my enemy. How will it end?"

But they rode on rapidly, until, through the trees in front, they caught the gleam of steel, and a hundred knights, glittering in golden ornaments, with their lances borne on high, rode down to meet them.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONNOC MORAN—THE KING TEMPTS FIACHRA—THE VOICE AGAIN.

At their head rode a man who would have claimed attention anywhere on earth, so noble was his bearing.

He might well have been born in the days of old, when the sons of God came upon earth for the love of its fair women.

In stature he was gigantic, towering even above Ith Eogan, a man of wonderful power. He was glittering in mail of remarkable splendor, inlaid and embossed with gold and silver. His high Roman helmet hung at his saddle-bow, and behind him rode his henchman, bearing his ax, lance and shield. The only covering of his noble head was a small flat cap, bearing a single heron feather.

His face was that of a man past the middle period of life. His beard was long and flowing half-way down his breast, for in those days the beard and hair were marks of nobility. That great beard, shining in the sun, the long flowing hair, the flashing eye and the commanding brow, combined to make a noble presence. As he saw the cavalcade of young knights advance he put back his hand and took from his follower his lance and shield, and Eogan saw that the shield bore only the sign of the cross and two right hands joined above a floating cloud. He knew the insignia of the house of Moran, and making the sign of friendship, advanced to meet the brave outlaw chief.

"Sir knight," said the outlaw, "I, Connoc Moran, lord of no kingdom save my lance and sword, do give thee greeting."

"You are welcome, Sir Connoc," replied Ith Eogan. "I am that Prince of Ulster for whose sake you have given the gage of battle, and I could do no less than come forth to meet thee, on this first day when I am out of ward."

"Ha!" cried Moran, "the king, then, for all he hates you, dared not keep you bound longer. Such was my thought when I sent my defiance to Branner. By all the saints, I would that my sword might cross that of a better man."

"Yet he is a true bull-dog," responded Ith Eogan. "He will fight while he can wag a finger, Sir Connoc."

"I had hope that he would stand me," replied Moran, "for fain would I show these usurping dogs how light I hold their best and bravest. Forward we go, then, if you think that the villain king—for such I hold him—will keep faith."

"He must. There is not now one man in Emana who will believe that I had ought to do with the death of my dear parents."

"I could tell thee—but no; why should I put thy heart to pain just now? Let us on to Emana."

Before the sun went down Connoc Moran had set up his pennon, bearing the cross and clasped hands, upon the plain outside Emana. A messenger came to invite him to enter the town.

"No," was the grim answer. "Say to your king that Connoc Moran has made a vow that he will not set foot upon a marble floor, or within the walls of a castle, until he hath proved, by his own hand or another, that Left-handed Branner hath lied."

The herald bore back the answer, and the face of the king became overcast. What he had hoped to gain by the presence of the brave outlaw within his castle it is impossible to say, but all could see that he was strangely discomfited. But no man in Ireland would have dreamed of questioning the right of Connoc Moran to make any vow he chose in such a cause, and he must have his way.

Again the herald went out, this time followed by a van bearing a rich present of wine, usquebaugh, and food of all kinds, as a present from the king. But, as before, Connoc Moran sent the herald back.

"Say to the king that Connoc Moran and his men drink no wine for seven days, because they are keeping a fast. They eat no meat and they have bread enough to last them many days."

"Now by Bel the Mighty," cried Redmond, when this message came back, "this outlaw spits upon our presents."

"The men of this new faith keep fasts on certain days," replied Cormac. "Let them have their way."

The night passed in revelry within the city, but Ith Eogan did not come to the king's banquet. He had not left Connoc Moran, and when his tent was set up, that of the young Prince was brought out of Emana and pitched beside it. To the message of the king demanding his presence in the city, he begged to be excused, as he had much to say to his champion, Connoc Moran.

"Now may my hand forget to wield a sword if I do not take vengeance on these rebellious dogs!" hissed the king, as he dashed down a golden cup. "Have I any friends at this table?"

If so, let them arm with speed, and sweep me away yonder rabble from before my gates."

"King Redmond," spoke Cormac solemnly, "hast thou forgotten that thy knightly oath is pledged?"

The king started and turned pale. Men might break other oaths, but the word of a knight could not be broken.

"I crave your pardon, Cormac, and I thank you," he said at last. "I was wroth for a moment that Ith Eogan should dare defy me in my own banquet hall. But let it pass. Branner, my warlike henchman, how does it fare with thee?"

"I am at ease," replied Branner.

"Then by my faith," cried young Fiachra, "thou has never seen Connoc Moran. I hold myself a good knight, and there does not live the man, save our good king and Ith Eogan, to whom I would bend my plume, in our good land of Ulster. But this man is a giant, towering over Ith Eogan by a head."

Branner turned pale.

"Ha, Fiachra," said the king. "Thou didst see him with Eogan?"

"I did not, oh king. But Lord Murtagh told me of it."

"How did they meet?"

"As strangers. When Connoc Moran saw them come he took lance and shield from his henchman and prepared for battle. But Eogan made the sign of peace; neither knew the other."

"'Twas well played, then; well played, indeed," declared the king. "I tell thee, Fiachra, that these two are leagued together."

"I cannot give the lie to the king," replied Fiachra. "My hands are bound by my oath of allegiance. But, should another man say that Ith Eogan conspired with Connoc Moran, my sword would be ready to answer for the truth of both these gallant chiefs."

"Look to thyself, Lord of Lena," hissed the king. "Thy hand is not quite clear of this stain. Beware that I do not forget myself, and do that for which I may be sorry."

"I crave permission to retire from the banquet," responded Fiachra, in a sullen tone. "Never have I borne the stain of treason calmly and I cannot do it now."

Many gloomy looks were cast upon the king, for, next to Ith Eogan, Fiachra was a favorite in Emana. The king noticed these looks, and knew that he had gone too far, and was not firmly enough seated on his throne to permit a breach between himself and the friends of Fiachra and Eogan.

"Keep thy seat, Lord of Lena," he said. "I was wrong to accuse you, for the house of Lena has ever been friendly to the king, and you could not turn traitor. Drink from my cup and pledge me and mine."

Fiachra took the cup, and looking straight at Mari, who sat at her father's side, drank in silence. But many saw that he pledged the fair Princess, not the king, and the partisans of King Redmond looked blank, for they knew what a power young Fiachra was in Ulster. A shadow had fallen upon the banquet, and the generous wine gave them no joy, for they felt that there was danger and death in the very air they breathed.

The king rose early and left the banquet, and very few remained behind. They gathered in knots in the halls and court-yards, speaking together in low, guarded tones. The king, attended by his guards, paced moodily back to his apartments, where he dismissed all save Branner.

"Look you, Branner," he exclaimed, when they were alone. "All this looks gloomy for you."

"For me alone, oh king?" demanded Branner, in a questioning tone.

"For you, for me, for all our party. There is sullen discontent on all hands, and this awkward plot will fail."

"Who would have dreamed that Connoc Moran would dare to take up the thing so fiercely? King Redmond, you were wrong to suffer Ith Eogan to live. If you had given me the word he would not cumber the earth now, and this living fear would have ceased."

"There is time yet," responded the king, in a meaning tone. "In a day all may change, if you have the brain I give you credit for. Why, between this and the day of battle, should not both Connoc Moran and Ith Eogan cease to live?"

A fiery glow came into the eyes of Left-handed Branner. He had heard with dread of the giant frame of Connoc Moran, and felt that in the coming battle, even if his cause were just, there would be little chance for him if that strong lance met his.

"They are but a hundred, Branner; a hundred knights are easily swept away," muttered the king.

"I begin to understand you, King Redmond, and I think I see my way. Rest in peace; if luck is not all against me, before two days are gone your foes and mine shall not live to trouble us more."

A long, low, hollow laugh, which seemed to come from the wall, answered his words, and the two conspirators looked at each other in speechless dismay.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BIRTH OF LOVE—EVA AND BRANNER—THE DRUID.

MARI, as well as her father, had left the banquet in deep trouble.

She was young, but her brain was acute, and she saw that trouble was brewing between her father and some of his nobles.

While she was only Lady Mari, the daughter of the Prince of Clare, she had been a happy girl. The sudden promotion of her father had not pleased her, for she saw in this added rank only an increase of danger. She would have been more happy if Cormac had been made king of Ulster, and Redmond of Clare had remained, as he was before, one of the strong supporters of the throne.

Since morning, when the strong arm of Ith Eogan had forced back her mad steed and lifted her from the saddle, she had only thought of him. Although she had only seen him with his visor down, she felt in her heart that he must be noble, or how could he take it on himself to give orders to so powerful a lord as Fiachra.

The Lord of Lena was silent as the grave in regard to his identity, but before the sun had reached meridian she knew that the man who had saved her was the one whom her father hated and feared most of any one on earth, Ith Eogan, Righ-Damhna of the dead king, Connor. She had often heard of him as one of the best and bravest of the young knights who had gained glory under the banner of Connor. Report had spoken of him highly, and he was held up on every hand as the flower of chivalry and true knighthood. Thus she was prepared to see in him a glorious young Apollo, and was not surprised that he should appear to her first in a heroic character.

Her heart had never been touched. Trained up in solitude, kept from the society of men except those who were her father's retainers, and upon whom she was taught to look down, she had never met a man she could love until she saw the brave young knight gallantly risk life or limb in saving an unknown lady from threatened danger.

She had not time, as yet, to analyze the feelings of her own heart. Mari was a mere girl, as years go, but old enough to be wedded, as many of her companions of the same age had been. But, when she came to study her own heart more closely, she would know that it was the birth of love which agitated that untried young heart.

The bevy of fair and noble maids who followed her whispered among themselves, for they were quick-sighted, and most of them knew right well who had saved her life that morning. Walking near her was Medora, the niece of Cormac the Wise, who, in her own way, was as great a beauty as Mari. But, while Mari was fair, with blue eyes and golden hair, Medora had the wavy blue black hair of her Connaught mother, and eyes which were dark and brilliant. She was taller than Mari, and the two girls loved each other well. Fiachra, Lord of Lena, had long ago chosen Medora for his bride, and rumor said that it would not be long before he would take her to his home.

"You look vexed, Medora," said Mari.

"And why should I not, acushla?" replied Medora. "Did you not hear the insult which the king gave to Fiachra, because he was true to his noble friend, Ith Eogan?"

"I heard, and was grieved."

"I could see that while Fiachra took the cup from the hand of the king, it was to you he drank and not to the king. And did you hear the mutterings about the table, and see the swords half drawn when the king called to those who were his friends to go out to the slaughter of Connoc Moran and his gallant knights?"

"Hush, Medora; some one might hear you," pleaded the Princess.

"And if they did, think you that I would abate one word of my right to speak, Princess Mari? I know that Fiachra is a true man, and would not draw the sword against the king. I know, too, that he would fight bravely to defend him if Connoc Moran and Eogan came as traitors; but against his loyal friends he will not draw his blade."

"I would have them friends," replied Mari, softly, as she approached the door of her bower.

"Touched; touched to the heart, my lily maid," Medora said laughing. "The strong arm of Eogan, when he brought the mad horse to his haunches, broke down the passage to your stubborn heart."

"Be silent, Medora, be silent. Some one might hear you, I repeat."

Some one had heard, and the last one upon earth whom they would have wished to take into their confidence had they known her secret heart. That one was Eva, Le Fay, a sister of Branner the henchman, who had been placed in the train of the Princess by her brother. A slight girl, with a fair, innocent-looking face, one whom you would not have thought capable of harming the smallest of God's creatures. But

in her heart she nursed a hatred of her young mistress, first for her high position, and next because she stood between her and her hate for Medora, who had been chosen before her by young Fiachra. She heard all they said, and the smile upon her fair face did not change, but she was whispering under her breath:

"Branner must know of this; Branner must tell the king."

She quickly excused herself when once in the bower chamber, and left the room. She went first to the apartments of her brother, but he was not there. Some one told her that he was with the king, and she seated herself by the window, looking out at the lights in the camp of Connoc Moran as they showed upon the plain, perhaps two miles distant. An hour later, Branner came in hurriedly.

"Ha, sister mine," he cried, "what do you here; why are you not with the Princess?"

"I came to see you, my brother."

"I have no time to waste in trifling. If you have anything of moment to say, say it quickly."

"You are quick and sharp with me, brother mine. Have your own way, then, although it was to do you a service I came here. If you can do without my help, surely I can do without yours."

"Stop a little, Eva, well named The Fay. If you have anything to tell me I will hear it, but I am upon the king's service, and may not delay in small matters."

"I have a little secret for your ear. This morning, while we hunted on the river, the horse of the Princess, frightened by the fall of a dead heron, took the bit in his teeth and ran. As bad luck would have it, Ith Eogan and his party, on their way to meet with Connoc Moran, met her in this danger, and he saved her."

"Any true knight would have done that," replied Branner, still with some uneasiness.

"That is true; but, a word in your ear, good brother, he is madly in love with the Princess, and she with him."

"It is false," cried Branner, furiously.

"You should have seen the baby face turn pink when Medora accused her of it a little time ago. Well, though there may be but little truth in it, still I judged it best to warn you."

"It was well done, Eva; well and wisely, but you are always wise. Death of my life! Shall this man, whom I hate for his father's sake, ever come between me and my vengeance? Little do these devils dream that Branner, the henchman, has such high thoughts. But then they do not know that we claim better blood than any which runs in the sluggish bodies of the sons of Eogan. Go, Eva, go; trust me, it will not be long when you shall hear of deeds which will make the city tremble. Saw you Aodh, the Druid, as you passed the corridor?"

"Ay; he stood in the doorway of the banquet hall with his arms folded upon his breast. What would you with that dark man?"

"Another time, Eva, another time. Now there is no time to waste, for I have work to do."

"Remember that I am always ready, and that my eyes are fixed, like yours, upon the mark."

"Little does Redmond of Clare know that he is only working for me, and that when the time comes I shall claim my own. Away, Eva; I will see you here to-morrow."

She hurried away, while as she went she heard him calling aloud for his servant, who came quickly at his call. Passing through the corridor she saw Aodh, the Druid, standing at the same place, his dark eyes fixed in space and his lips moving as in invocation. This man, the chief of all the Druids in Ulster, had seen with pain that the new sect of Christians were working in secret, and that his heathen rites no longer claimed the ear of a whole people. It touched the savage heart of this dark heathen, and even now he nursed a scheme to take revenge on all who bore the name of Christian.

As he heard the light step of Eva he half turned his head, and looked at her fixedly.

"Thou art fair," he muttered, "but thou hast the guile of the serpent. Yes, thou and thine are fated to rebuild our temples and replant our groves in Ulster, and I love thee for it."

Eva bent her head in reverence. She had been reared to look upon the Druids as holy men who had power to carry on converse with the great god Bel.

"Your blessing, my father," she said.

"Thou hast it, Eva Le Fay. Not for thy goodness, not for thy beauty, but for the guile which is in thy heart. Connor fell because he listened to the voice of the tempter; Redmond will fall because he hath not strength enough to sweep his enemies out of the path, and listens to the specious counsels of Cormac, falsely named 'The Wise,' but thou and thine shall conquer by the force of the evil which is in your natures."

Eva laughed merrily.

"Thou art a strange priest, father. Sure am I no maiden ever had such praise as this. My brother seeks you even now."

"I felt myself drawn to him. Be satisfied, daughter, I will go."

Eva entered the bower chamber, where Mari, guided by an old harper, was touching the strings of a golden framed harp and singing in a sweet voice a romantic ballad of one of

the old bards. As the girl came in the old man shivered and looked up quickly.

"Why didst thou start, harper?" asked Mari, looking at the old man.

He made no answer for a moment, but never took his eyes from Eva's face.

"Wilt know me again when we meet, old man?" she said, gayly.

"I know thee now," was the answer. "Evil art thou, oh maiden; evil is in thy heart."

"This is pleasant, thou old specter," she responded, angrily. "In what did I ever harm thee?"

"In naught, child. But to me is given to read what the future has in store, and I see that thou art born under an evil star."

He rose, took up his harp, and went out without another word, leaving the maidens looking at each other in utter wonder.

"What is there in my face that the old harper should say such things to me?" cried Eva, pettishly.

"Care not for it, sweet," replied Mari. "I never knew thee to do aught of evil."

"He said the evil was to come," laughed Medora, who did not love Eva Le Fay.

"Princess Mari," exclaimed the girl, quickly, "if you doubt my faith, put me away. I can go back to my old home amid the green hills of Clare. Sure am I that I have known but little true happiness since it was my lot to come to Emanah."

"Child, child," answered the Princess, "be not angry for a hasty word, and do not care for what the old man said. There; dismiss them, my Medora, and let us go to rest."

The bower maidens accepted their dismissal gladly, and while some retired to their own apartments, others stole out to meet their lovers in the castle gardens. Mari and Medora, when they were alone, instead of retiring, went up to the highest casement of the tower and looked out across the fields.

The lights yet burned brightly in Connoc Moran's camp, and a distant hum was heard as of many steeds trampling and neighing. Then one by one the lights went out, and all was still.

As they gazed they saw a man step out of the shadow of the castle wall and look across the plain. Even in the uncertain light of the moon, at that distance there was something in his attitude which reminded them of Branner the henchman. He stood like a statue for a moment, and then another form stole out and joined him. This they knew by his priestly robe to be a Druid, and the stature was that of Aodh. Man after man followed until at least six hundred warriors, their armor shining under the light of the moon, were ranged beneath the wall.

"What means this?" whispered Mari. "Why this secrecy, if they mean not evil? Surely my father would not break his word, and permit them to slay Connoc Moran and his men by treachery."

"Oh mercy!" faltered Medora, falling on her knees. "Fiachra is with them; Fiachra will die."

Mari started up, and darting down the winding stairs, reached the corridor in which were her father's apartments. Bursting past the guards, who looked at her in wonder, but made no attempt to stay her, she found her father at the casement, with his eyes fixed upon the moving troops.

CHAPTER X.

VAIN PLEADING—TREACHEROUS ATTACK.

"Oh father—oh king!" she cried. "Why is this march of armed warriors under the walls of Emanah?"

He turned upon her with the quickness of the tiger, and for the first time the man who had been ever tender in his love for her, who, no matter how base and cruel he might be to others, always loved her well, looked at her with angry eyes.

"Mari," he hissed, angrily, "who taught you to make and meddle?"

"No matter who taught me, father. It is enough that I see Branner the henchman and Aodh the Druid gathering men under the walls. I know that Branner hates the Prince of Ulster, and Aodh hates Connoc Moran because he has embraced the Christian faith, a faith so beautiful and pure that I have been half tempted to take it."

"Mad girl! Would you bring down on your head the vengeance of the gods?"

"Father, you cannot turn me from my purpose. Hard as it is to do, I accuse you of combining with Branner the henchman and Aodh the Druid to break your guarantee. For the honor of our noble house, you may not do it."

"Girl!" he cried, furiously, "what devil has come into this heart of yours? Have you forgotten your affection for me all in a moment? Is the tale which I have heard, that you love my deadly enemy, Eogan, true? If I was sure of it, by all the gods! I should be tempted to forget that my blood runs in your veins, and set my foot upon you."

Mari folded her arms and looked at him proudly.

"Though you send me to the block, oh my

father, still I will speak my mind. I tell thee, I, that if you send men to destroy Connoc Moran and his knights, you put a blot upon your escutcheon which years of penance could not wash away. King, you will be perjured; knight, you will have broken your vow of chivalry. The men who follow you now for the sake of your royal name and known bravery, will think it no wrong to turn against you at their will, for you will have set them the example. Yes, strike me, an you will; I will not raise a finger to stay you."

The king hesitated, and stood looking at her with hand half lifted. But the brave girl never blenched, and stood there defiantly.

"I had not thought," he gasped at last, lowering his hand, "that one of my race, one whom I have loved better than my life, should so rebel against me."

"I do not rebel against you, my father; I war against wrong. Give the order that these men be recalled, for you can do it. Give it, or as I love the memory of my mother, I will run into the open street and cry out aloud that the king breaks his guarantee, and sends men to destroy those who are here under the safeguard of his honor."

"Would you dare?" hissed the king, springing upon her suddenly and bearing her to the open casement. "Then die, since you would balk my vengeance thus."

He dragged her out of the window and both stood upon the stone ledge. The girl did not blench, and she never took her eyes from the face of her father.

"I would rather die than live to suffer the dishonor of such a father," she cried. "Cast me down!"

Then all the father worked upon his heart, and he remembered how in this bright young creature he had built up strong hopes for Ulster, when his hand could no longer sustain the kingdom. For this man; little as he might scruple at crime to gain his ends, did it not so much for personal ambition as for the glory of Ulster.

"I cannot do it, mad girl," he cried. "Go, proclaim my dishonor, and in three days' time you shall see me dead or a fugitive, a price upon my head. Go, if you can, and do this, and destroy me."

"Mercy, father, mercy; have compassion on yourself and on me," she sobbed, as both came in at the open casement.

At this moment the blare of a trumpet and a fierce battle-cry rung through the silence of the night. Both looked outward and saw that if he had wished to recall the band of the Druid and the henchman, it was now too late. The plain was covered with people, most of them in the lowest station of life, rolling onward like an angry flood, spears, axes and morions flashing in the rays of the torches which they carried. Loud shouts rent the air, and high above all rose the cries of the Druids, inciting their followers to rush forward. Then the motive of all this was explained; they meant to make it a war of religion; a war of the Druids against the sect of Christians; The chief Druid had set his satellites at work among the lower orders, and they were now rushing out in a living tide, which nothing could turn aside.

Branner, having set this dangerous ball in motion, had drawn back to let events take their course. Through and through the mass which rolled toward the camp of Connoc Moran rushed the Druids, exhorting their mad hosts to hurry to the slaughter. With mad yells they hurled themselves upon the sleeping camp.

"It is over, Mari," said the king, sadly. "I was wicked, I see it now, and men would execrate my name if they knew my share in this."

"They shall not know that the king has been so base; but for Branner—"

"And what of him, fair Princess?" said a mocking voice. "Branner is here; did you call him?"

"What now, Branner; what now?" cried the king.

"Sire, the Druids have roused the people, and they have rushed upon the camp of Connoc Moran. I would have staid them if I could, but—"

"Branner," exclaimed the Princess, "either be silent, or lie not. Fool, I know all this hideous plot for the murder of brave men, and I know whom to accuse, none so well as I. Slave, stand back, or you shall feel my clinched hand in your face. Bear back, I say, or by Heaven—"

"What word is that? Good king, your child has heard the heresies of these Christians, and will be one of them ere long. But there is no time to waste, king, if we would save the faith of your guarantee. Shall I take the Craobh Ruadh and march? They of the Red Branch will strike hard."

"Away, then; away! I repent me that this was done, and would give five years of my life if it could be recalled."

"There is no need," cried Mari, joyfully. "As I live by bread this horde of murderers and vile priests are broken like chaff before the weapons of Moran's men. Right bravely done, Knights of the Clasp'd Hands. Hew the murderers down!"

Branner and the king both sprung out upon

the battlements, quickly followed by the Princess. A bright light had suddenly leaped up in the midst of the camp of Connoc, and by its light they could see those valiant men, armed to the teeth, already in the saddle and hewing down the front of the attacking force with ax and sword. The great mass came rolling back toward the castle wall, while on their track came the strong Knights of the Clasp'd Hands. Foremost among them, smiting and slaying, they saw the giant form of Connoc Moran. He swayed a huge two-handed sword, and every time it fell a soul went to judgment.

"Ha!" he cried, as he struck. "For the Cross, knights. Death to the Druids; down with the servants of Bel! Thou great miscreant, Aodh, let me get thee within arm's length, and a sharp sword shall cut thee in two."

"Bear back, bear back," shouted Aodh. "As Bel liveth, I will cleave you to the jaws if you turn not back and fight. Strike, ye false knaves; unworthy sons of Ulster, will ye not beat down these base maligners of the gods?"

Urged by the angry priests, the men half turned again, but as they saw that mighty sword swaying like a beam of living light above their heads, while on every side the strong knights beat down their comrades, they lost heart. And there, in the front of the fray, striking, not with the edge, but with the flat of the sword, rode Fiachra and Ith Eogan.

"False hounds!" hissed Fiachra, "hence to your kennels. Shall such as you sneak out under the cover of night to murder noble men? Back, I say! I would the man who sent you, Left-handed Branner, were here, for I would try his armor well."

"Home, men of Ulster," shouted Eogan. "I would not turn my sword's edge against carles who are urged on to fight by mad priests of Bel; home, ye knaves, home."

The gates of the city swung inward, and Connoc Moran and his men drew rein, while the crowd of fugitives rolled into the city. Then, with a derisive shout he held up his great brand in the sight of all.

"Thus doth Connoc Moran punish a traitorous act. Draw back, my knights; rein in your steeds and back to camp. As for this carrion, let those who sent them here remove them."

The harness rung, the hoofs sounded, and the knights were gone, while high above them the king and Branner, awe-struck, looked in each other's faces. Their great plot had failed, and even the Druids, on whom they had pinned their faith, had not the power to aid them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DRUIDS' VENGEANCE—CONNOC MORAN'S LEECH.

Mari sprung back into the apartment and ran through the long corridor to her own rooms. Medora was not where she had left her, but soon came hurrying in.

"The right cause wins," she cried; "woe to those who would do wrong, for evil comes home to the doers. Ah, you were right to love Ith Eogan, Mari; he is a noble knight, and too proud to strike hinds and kernes with the edge of the sword. Saw you Fiachra too? Am I not in the right to be proud of him?"

"Woe, woe, woe for the king and people of Ulster!" cried a thundering voice in the corridor. "Bel is angry; he hides his face from the people, who permit the slaughter of his priests."

Medora dashed open the door and looked out into the hall. Fifty Druids advanced, bearing in their midst the dead bodies of five of their number, who had fallen in the midnight broil. Three of them showed the handiwork of Connoc Moran, and seemed half divided from crown to shoulder by the stroke of his mighty brand.

"Come forth, oh king," cried Aodh; "come forth and behold the work of this Christian knight, Connoc Moran."

Aroused by the tumult, Redmond came out into the corridor. As he saw the Druids bearing their dead, his eyes brightened, for he knew that these men were relentless, and that nothing would appease them save the sacrifice of the men who had slain their brothers.

"We demand vengeance, oh king," cried the savage chief Druid. "What we demand we will have, for Bel can claim his own."

"Then let Bel avenge his own by the hands of his priests," replied the king, coldly. "These men are here under my safeguard, and had the right to defend themselves against any attack. Take away your dead, and give them the burial rites of the Druids, and look not to me for vengeance."

Aodh gazed fixedly at Redmond, and read his meaning in his eyes. He would not openly avenge the slain, but if they did aught for vengeance's sake he would not harm them.

"The king reasons coldly, but rightly," said the Druid. "Come, my sons; bear the bodies to our distant grove."

The grim procession filed slowly out of the palace, and was gone.

"A herald, ho!" cried the king. "To me, Tashish the Bard, and listen to my words. Go to the camp of Connoc Moran and give him

greeting from me. Say that the king grieves much that the rage of the Druids should have sent them out to attack him in his camp. Say that the Druids, bearing their dead, came to me for vengeance, and I would not grant it. Take health and greeting to Fiachra and Ith Eogan, and say that from the battlements I saw how they smote the people with the flat of the sword, and was glad that the blades of such noble lords were not red with the blood of kernes."

An hour passed before the return of the herald, and the king waited for him in the great hall. The blare of a trumpet announced his coming, and he paced into the hall in all the pomp and ceremony of his station, accompanied by a brother herald, sent by Moran.

"Greeting to Redmond, King of Ulster, so called, from the mighty Christian knight, Connoc Moran," cried the Christian herald. "Thus saith my master:

"The hands of the Knights of the Cross are strong, and they do not fear rough knaves, urged on by cowardly Druids. Bloody are the Druids in thought, word and deed; vile and impious wretches, they wrong the good men of Ulster by their acts. Connoc Moran has sent some of them home with broken heads, and more will follow, until not one of the serpents remain to cumber the free soil of Ulster. Connoc Moran asks no aid in this, for his hands are strong enough to do his own work."

"Nobly have you done the work of your master, herald," responded Redmond. "Give him a purse for largesse, and let him go. Call out a captain of a hundred and bid him scour the streets and drive home all the people who are abroad. And say that when the morrow comes some among them shall rue what they have this night done."

The orders were obeyed, and the king and his suite retired again. In the camp of Connoc Moran there was no sleep that night. The warriors did not remove their harness, but lay down with their weapons beside them, waiting for a new attack.

"I warned you that the villain king would deny his part in this breach of faith," said Moran. "Better would it be for you, noble lords, if you took my advice and rode away with me to my mountain fortress. There, secure from attack, we would gather strength to drive Redmond from the throne and seat Cormac there until Ith Eogan could take up the scepter according to law."

"I must refuse it, brave Moran," replied the young Prince. "Far be it from me to head rebellion upon my father's soil, unless deeds of blood drive me to it."

"That will come in good time," was the gloomy reply. "Well, take thine own way, gallant Prince. 'Tis but six days more before the lists are set up, and then Branner must either meet me or declare himself a foul liar, unworthy of the name of knight."

"He will meet you bravely. And look to yourself, Moran, for he is a gallant warrior."

Moran stretched out his strong right arm proudly.

"Have no fear, Prince. Connoc Moran was not born to fall before the sword of such a man as Branner."

"I am not yet satisfied upon one point, Moran," said Fiachra. "Why did you call up your knights and arm them for the battle an hour before the attack?"

"I have the gift of second sight, and saw them coming, perhaps," was the reply.

"Talk not to me in that strain, Moran," replied Fiachra. "You had warning of the coming danger in some earthly way."

"It may as well be as you say, Lord of Lena. Let it rest as it is, and be satisfied that the warning came in time. For, had that brutal herd come down upon us while we slept, your stately heads would lie as low as mine. For, believe me, Lord of Lena, you are not better loved by yonder false king than is Ith Eogan."

"Let us walk forth and inspect the lines," said the Prince. "It might be that they seek to attack us yet."

Connoc Moran rose, and bidding the henchman walk before them with a torch, they went out to view the field. Upon the point where the first attack was made, the bodies of the slain lay thickly on the earth, and out of every ten, one was the body of a Druid.

"These are the men whom Redmond used to urge on the people, because we are of the Christian religion," said Moran. "Look at the face of this man. He sprung from the dregs of the people, and was led into this life by the hope that he might live without the daily toil which falls to the peasant's lot. The face is cruel, for he has often looked upon the blood of innocent victims. Such are the men, noble lords, to whom your religion teaches you to look up."

At this moment a strange thing happened. The man over whom they stood, with a sudden bound, reached his feet. In his right hand he held a heavy knife, almost as long as a sword, and with it struck full at the head of Connoc Moran. He went down crashing, for he did not wear his helmet, and the only defense for his head was his heavy cap of fur. They saw the blood run down to his white beard, and, accom-

panied by a cry of rage, the sword of Fiachra leaped from his scabbard.

"The curse of Bel be on you if you strike, Lord of Lena," cried the Druid.

"Murder!" shouted the young chief. "Think you that will stay me? Defend yourself, base wretch."

The great sword rose in the air and fell with a whistling sound. The body of the Druid, divided in half at the waist, fell to the earth.

"So perish such wretches," cried Fiachra, as he leaned upon his bloody sword. "Now, Bel, send thy lightnings down."

He stood in an inspired attitude, his hand clasping the golden hilt of his strong brand, and his flashing eyes lifted to the starry sky, as if defying the god of the Druids.

"Bel hath no power," responded the henchman of Connoc Moran, as he bent over his master. Connoc, noble Moran, speak! How does it fare with you?"

But Connoc Moran lay without a sign upon the earth. His eyes were closed, and when the faithful henchman laid his hand upon his bosom, there did not seem to be any pulsation.

"Oh, father of mercy," gasped the henchman. "Aid me, noble lords; lift him and carry him to his tent. Ah, me, the plot of Branner hath not quite failed, for the strong arm of Moran will not be raised against him in this battle. But look to yourself, left-handed murderer; there are those who follow Connoc Moran who are strong enough to beat you to your knee."

The young Prince and Fiachra laid the silent form of Moran upon a couch and divested him of his armor. Stately as he looked when armed, there was something magnificent in his grand, manly beauty as he lay there, perhaps upon his death-bed. The henchman had darted rapidly out of the tent the moment they laid him down, and rushing into a smaller pavilion to the right, surprised an old man, who, with the body of a dead kerne laid upon a low table, was busy with a dissecting-knife, examining the injury which had been done to the skull by a blow from a mace.

"The fiends fly away with you, Ronald," he cried, angrily, shaking his withered hand, armed with the scalpel, at the intruder. "Death of my body, man; how dare you interrupt me at such a time as this."

"Thou withered bag of bones; thou old anatomist!" cried Ronald, "know you not that Connoc Moran lies wounded in his tent, dead, perhaps, by a felon blow from the hand of a vile Druid? Come, or I will shake the life out of thy withered carcass."

"Thou lovest thy master well, Ronald of the Scar," said the grim man of medicine, "or thou wouldst not surely dare to brave me, who, by the touch of a pin, the motion of my hand, could send thee to judgment. But I love thee in that thou lovest strong Connoc, Ronald. Go before, and I will quickly follow."

Ronald darted back, but scarcely had he entered the tent when the old leech, a man whose fame had spread far and wide over all Ireland, came softly in, carrying several instruments in his hand. He pushed rudely through the circle which stood about Connoc Moran, and ordered them to stand back.

"Knight or noble, I care not," he cried pettishly. "All must give place to me and to death; we two are right royal. Bring a ewer hither, Ronald; make haste. I must wash away this clotted blood."

He quickly washed the blood from the hair and as he did so his thin fingers ran rapidly along the skull until they found a depression, not larger than a farthing, where the bone seemed to be beaten in. Taking his sharp scalpel he cut away the flowing hair from the spot and laid it bare. Then as he ran his fingers over the spot his weird face lighted up, and he turned his eyes from face to face until they rested upon the handsome ones of the Prince and Fiachra.

"You two can stay," he said. "There is only one chance for the life of the best and bravest man upon the soil of Ireland, and I will take that chance. The rest go out."

All the attendants left the place and the strange physician again bent over the prostrate form of Connoc Moran.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COMBAT.

THE day of combat had come, and Branner, with a haughty heart, prepared for the fight. He had heard glorious news from Moran's camp, which said that Connoc Moran was dead, slain by the hand of the Druid, and that another must fight the battle in his stead. He had not much hope in a battle with Moran, but there was not another knight whom he would not have met boldly, confident of success.

The king was in good humor, and personally gave his attention to the setting of the lists. The news of battle had gone forth, and from every part of Ulster, and even from other kingdoms, knights and warriors of all grades had come to see the battle fought. For they knew well that since the days of Ith no such combat had been fought as this would be, or by more doughty champions.

"All was confusion in Emana, and upon the broad plain where Connoc Moran had pitched his camp. Strange as it may seem, the people bore his knights no ill-will, because they had so nobly defended themselves against the midnight assault of the disciples of Bel. The truth was that the Druid rites no longer retained a strong hold upon the people, who were pleased with the patriarchal forms of the new religion. Hence, the appearance of the Knights of the Cross was greeted with cheers as loud as those which sounded when the Craobh Ruadh came in view; for, popular as were the Red Branch Knights, as gallant a body of men as the earth ever bore, the fame of Connoc Moran and his men had become household words, and he was looked upon as the one of all others to uphold the symbol which he bore upon his shield."

The lists inclosed, perhaps, nearly five acres of ground. From different parts of the barrier fluttered the banners of the many princes and lords who owned Redmond of Clare master. Under each of these pennons a strong body of retainers could be seen, bandying gibes with each other, and with the men of other houses who passed them by. The weird strains of the Irish harp could be heard on every hand. The plain beyond the barrier was black with a moving mass, thousands upon thousands, whose number was continually augmented by those who came from all parts of the compass to witness this great battle.

On the eastern side of the lists a great platform had been built, with seats for ladies, and in the midst, under a golden silk canopy, the great chair of the king was set.

The platform was already crowded with fair ladies of the court, surrounding the high chair of Mari, who, as the highest lady of the court, took precedence over every lady in the land. The face of the fair Princess was clouded, for upon the issue of this combat depended the future of the man she loved in secret. Her eyes roved through the ranks of the Knights of the Cross to see if she could there discern him, but she did not see him. She looked at the men who ranged themselves under the banner of Fiachra hoping to find him, but although the young Lord of Lena was there, the commanding figure of Prince Eogan was not in sight.

On the south of the lists stood the pavilion of Connoc Moran. It was a great tent, which would have held five hundred men, if crowded. A great chair was set before the entrance, but it was empty.

The king was in his place, looking anxiously from side to side, for he knew that if Branner won the battle the people would demand the death of Eogan, and that alone could seat him firmly on the throne.

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye, knights and lords!" cried a herald. "Let no man be so bold as to touch the barrier upon pain of death, at the will of the king. Let the two champions advance."

At the call Branner stepped forth from his pavilion on the north. He was clad in mail of mingled brass, bronze and steel, the armor of that period, and truly, villain though he was, his was a noble presence. With a firm and lofty step he crossed the lists, and bent the knee before the king.

"Branner, son of Keth," cried the king, "you have heard the words of Connoc Moran, in that he defies you to mortal combat to prove the faith of Ith Eogan, Prince of Ulster. Do you still affirm that Eogan leagued with Connoc Moran to slay King Connor and his queen?"

"I do affirm it and will prove it with lance, sword and battle-ax. I am firm in my defense," replied Branner.

As he spoke the curtain of Moran's pavilion moved, and an armed knight stepped out. Unlike Branner, he had his visor down, and no man could see his face. He too moved with a haughty stride across the lists and slightly bent his knee.

"Who art thou?" demanded the king. "What is thy name?"

"I have no name, King Redmond, until I have proved upon the body of this toad-spotted traitor that he hath belied two brave men, Connoc Moran and Ith Eogan," was the reply.

"Thy name we must know," replied the king, sternly.

"No, no, my king," whispered Cormac. "None can force him to show his face if he is accepted as a champion by the Knights of the Cross. You know, sire, that rumor saith that Connoc was treacherously slain by a Druid, and if so they have a right to send another man in his place."

The king gnawed his thin lips savagely, and cast his eyes down upon the strange champion. As he stood beside Branner they could see that he was a powerful knight, for, while he lacked a little of his ponderous build, he was more graceful in appearance, and looked lithe and strong.

"Thou wilt not show thy face?" demanded the king.

"When the battle is decided you shall see it," replied the champion. "I claim my right—as one fighting in the place of Connoc Moran, treacherously beaten down by a vile Druid priest—to keep my face covered."

"Have your will, then. You say that Branner speaks falsely, and that you will prove it on his body?"

"Ay, King Redmond; on two such knaves as he."

"Then," cried the king, "champions, retire to your pavilions, and on the third sound of the trumpet, set on with the lance. Three courses shalt thou run with the ashen spear, and then end the battle with ax, sword and dagger. To your tents."

The two knights, glaring defiance at each other through the bars of their helmets, slowly retreated from the presence of the king, and each took his seat, the champion knight at the right of Moran's pavilion, and Branner in front of his own. The king raised his warder, and a long blast of a trumpet was heard. At once a herald rode out from Moran's pavilion, and the champion took the bridle of his war steed from the hand of his henchman, and set his foot in the stirrup, while a man with his face covered took a seat in the chariot.

"Hear, hear, hear!" cried the herald. "In the name of our God, here I stand, champion of the right, and defy Branner, son of Keth, to do battle with me. And I will prove upon his body that traitor-like he lies, and that even to King Redmond, whom he claims to love, he is at heart a traitor."

The king cast a dark look at Branner, who half rose from his great chair, and made a savage gesture at the champion.

The herald retired, and again the trumpet sounded, and another herald rode out from the north, while Branner descended rapidly, caught his bridle, and leaped into the saddle, a movement which was quickly followed by the other champion, and each took a lance from the hand of his henchman.

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye!" cried the herald. "Here stand I, Branner, son of Keth, and in the teeth of my defamers I fling a bold defiance. I say that I have spoken truly, and I will prove it by my deeds. And to those who say that I am false to Redmond, King of Ulster, I will make reply, that only traitors say so. Let the trumpet sound, and give the word of battle."

"In the name of God," sounded the word from the south, as the peal of the trumpet was heard. Instantly the strong lances came down, and with shields advanced and ready hand and eye the brave champions set forth at a mad gallop, bending forward to meet the shock, and ready to give blow for blow. Stern was the dint which Branner gave the champion. Strong as he was, the shivering of the spear upon his shield bore him back until his mailed back almost touched the haunches of his good steed, but he was up in a moment; and reining his horse with a master hand, made him perform a curvet, and returned to his place, holding aloft the broken shaft of his lance. Branner, on the contrary had been so shaken in his saddle that he lost both stirrups, which in a joist of honor would have lost him the day, even though he splintered his lance fairly. A murmur of delight was heard on all sides, and the ladies' pavilion rung with applause from the fair dames, who delighted in noble deeds.

Branner cast away the fragment of his lance with an angry cry and rode back to his pavilion, where he selected his lance with greater care, and prepared for the second course.

The shock of this onset was terrible. The plumes of the stranger knight were torn from his helm and went fluttering away, and for a moment his head swam and he seemed hardly able to keep the saddle. But still he held his course, and a wild shout went up as Branner was seen rolling in the dust with his lance still clasped in his brawny hand. He was on his feet instantly, the lance thrown away, and his battle-ax ready. By the rules of the combat the stranger knight had the right to attack him on horseback, and a groan of sympathy went up from the friends of Branner. But to the wonder and delight of all who gaze on noble deeds, the knight reined back his horse, made him perform a demi-volte, and rode back to the pavilion, while his herald rode out.

"Give him a horse," cried the herald; "thus saith my master: 'No mean advantage will I take over a gallant man, though that man be a false-hearted villain.'"

"Certes," muttered the king, "yonder grim champion is a true knight, for Branner could not claim a horse when he had lost his saddle fairly."

"I ask no courtesy from him," screamed Branner. "Let him set on."

But the knight sat like a statue in his saddle, and made no movement in advance until he saw Branner mounted, and with his ax prepared. Then he took up his own ax, a weapon of remarkable beauty, forged from the famed Irish steel and bronze commingled. The handle was of ebony, curiously carved, and the blade broad and sharp. Urging their horses to their speed, the two warriors met in the middle of the lists.

And now followed a battle of terrible fierceness. It had been said that in all Ulster no man could wield a battle-ax as could left-handed Branner. Perhaps the very fact of his using his left hand made him a more dangerous oppo-

nent, for the peculiar manner in which a blow is delivered from the left hand is very annoying to an opponent. Blow after blow was rained with lightning swiftness upon the opposing shields. The war-horses, feeling the touch of hand or knee, swerved from side to side and struck at each other with their armed hoofs. But, well as Branner used the ax, he had found his match in the unknown, who, with singular address, received each blow upon his shield, and repaid it by another of more than equal force.

But now a savage yell burst from the lips of Branner as he aimed a blow full at the head of the stranger. He covered with the shield, when the direction of the blow was changed and the keen edge struck the horse's head just above the eye and was buried in the brain. The steed dropped as if stricken by a lightning bolt, but the strange knight was on the alert, and alighted on his feet with his shield half raised and his ax ready. All looked to see Branner leap from the saddle and meet him on equal terms, but, with a fierce laugh, he drew his long brand from its scabbard and waved it above his head.

"Thou fool!" he cried. "I asked no mercy from thee, and I will give thee none."

"Felon!" replied the knight, "would you assail me on foot, when I gave a horse to thee?"

"Ay, would I," answered Branner, with a taunting laugh. "Thou art mine and thus I win thee."

A groan of dismay was heard, and taunting hisses sounded from all parts of the field. Up to this time all sympathy had been with Branner, for, if anything, he was the weakest of the two. But the strange knight had won their respect by the brave manner in which he had relinquished the advantage which he had gained, and they had looked for the like action from Branner. It was the day of chivalry, and the Irish heart was filled with the knightly pride of that day. No wonder, then, that on every side the sound of discontent could be heard as Branner swung his brand on high and prepared to rush down upon the knight, who, without moving hand or foot, waited for his charge.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHRISTIAN VICTOR—THE VISOR LIFTED.

FIACHRA, who was one of the marshals of the lists, half drew his blade and made a motion as if he would join in the battle, but a friend laid his hand upon his arm.

"No, no, my lord," he said. "Look there! Good blow, brave champion; well struck, defender of the truth!"

We have said that the stranger knight stood quietly awaiting the charge, until the head of the horse was close upon him, when, with the agility of the mountain cat he darted to the right side and out of reach of the brand in the hand of Branner. As he did so he struck with his keen ax. Full upon the neck of the war-steed the bright weapon fell, and the head of the horse was completely severed from the body, and he dropped as if shot, slightly entangling the foot of Branner in the stirrup. Before he could free himself the champion had his sword in his hand, and was ready to meet him.

"I might slay thee if I would, dog," he cried, "but I will not. Free thy foot in safety, and prepare to meet me upon equal terms."

"Thou art Connoc Moran," hissed Branner. "By holy Bel, they have lied to me."

"Whether I am Connoc Moran or another matters not to you. Vile wretch; twice in this battle have I held you at my mercy, and I would not strike; and now see! You would not give mercy or courtesy, and I devote you to the sword."

"You must win me ere you wear me," was the bold reply. "Why do you hesitate?"

"Because I am lost in wonder that a man so brave should be so great a villain. I would that I could see in thee some little hope of good, and it might tempt me to spare thy life."

Branner uttered a furious cry, as he rushed upon the speaker with his huge sword lifted for a blow. But the champion, with shield advanced, marched on to meet him, his great brand gleaming in his armed hand, and his eyes, full of battle fire, fixed upon the face of Branner, watching his every movement. Branner made his sword whistle through the air in furious circles, while upon his broad shield, his crest, the wild boar of Clare, with flaming eyes and tusks half bare, showed fierce and warlike.

The shield of the unknown had no blazonry of any kind, nothing to show who he was or whence he came—nothing save a simple cross, the sign of the new faith. His armor was plain in every part, but of matchless temper, a fine chain mail, the meshes of which no ordinary sword could break through.

"Ha!" cried Branner. "Ware the wild boar's rush; 'ware his long white tusk!"

A long, low, pleasant laugh came from behind the barred visor of the champion, and he took another step in advance and whirled his keen blade above his head.

"Now, hound," he cried, "one blow shall prove the temper of thy shield!"

The huge brand came slanting downward with lightning swiftness. Realizing his danger,

Branner lifted his round shield and met the blow. But, to his horror, the sword did not cease to fall, and the tough shield was split from rim to rim and dropped in two parts from his arm. Then the assailant cast away his own target, and taking a dagger in his left hand to parry with, advanced at a rapid pace, forcing his enemy back. Then, for the first time, they realized what a complete master of the weapon he was. The blows of Branner might as well have fallen upon a roof of steel. Again and again he struck, but the blows were turned harmlessly aside by the dagger or the brand. The champion seemed to bide his time, and at last it came, while Branner was recovering from the effect of a terrible blow which he had dealt in vain. At that moment the weapon of the Christian alighted with stunning force upon the crest of Branner. No earthly armor could have stood that shock, and the villain came to his knee. He faintly raised his blade to guard his head, and again that bright brand came flashing down, and the broken blade parted in his hand.

It was over!

No, not yet; for Branner, crying like a maniac, "I have no sword!" threw himself within the guard of the champion and caught him in his arms.

It was now a question of brute force, and the muscular build of Branner promised well in such a struggle. But, strong as he was, he found a foeman willing to meet him even in this way. The champion flung away brand and dagger, and the two closed in the last desperate struggle, which was to end it all. The terrible continuance of the strife did not seem to have affected them in the least, and the applause of the multitude grew almost frantic at this unlooked-for finale.

"By my sword, Cairnie," cried the king, turning to the commander of the Craobh Ruadh, "whoever yonder knight may be, he hath given us royal sport, and if he does not win, he hath struggled bravely for it."

"Such a man ought to win," replied Cairnie, in a tone of enthusiasm. "What knight in all your broad domain would three times in such a battle give up a certain victory? Ha! look there!"

They saw the strong champion, with one hand on the hip and the other on the shoulder of his enemy, suddenly drop upon one knee, and as he did so, throw Branner completely over his head. He struck the earth with a crash, and instantly the champion had his knee upon the breast of the fallen villain and the dagger at his throat.

"Yield thee, Branner, yield thee!" he cried.

There was no reply. Branner, though he might be villainous enough, was no coward, and he would not beg his life. Then the blood began to show in the glaring eyes of the champion as he bore upon the handle of the dagger, when, with a crash, the king threw his warder down; and flinging aside his dagger, the champion arose and advanced to a place before the throne.

"The battle is over, my king," he said. "Yonder lies the man who uttered such foul lies, and I ask you if I have not redeemed the knightly honor of Connoc Moran and Ith Eogan."

"My judges shall answer you. Rise, Cormac, and speak your mind."

"Sir Knight," said the old judge, rising slowly, "I am old, and have not much longer to stay upon the earth. In thirty pitched battles have I taken part, and I was a stanch champion once. Age may have robbed my limbs of their power, but I know when a battle is bravely fought. And I say to you, that in all those thirty stricken fields, I never saw a warrior who would give his foe so much vantage, out of the love of courtesy, as thou hast done this day. By the voice of the judges you are the victor, and have proved Branner, the son of Keth, a false traitor. Connoc Moran and Ith Eogan are stainless; let all good men rejoice."

"Come hither, champion," cried the king. "Here is a chain of beaten gold, which came to me from the hand of my father, years and years ago. It is an heir-loom which hath been won by the hand of valor many a time and oft. To you, by the hand of our daughter, Mari, we offer this rich gift."

"One moment, King Redmond. Yonder man is mine, for I conquered him."

"Ay; dispose of him as you may see fit," was the cold reply.

"Your pardon for a moment," replied the champion. "Branner is badly hurt, and I would put him under good care. Ah, me; the man who is down has no friends, it seems. Here to me, henchman."

The man who had attended him through the battle came forward, bowing low before the king.

"Take Branner to my pavilion and put him in charge of the great leech. Bid him, if he loves me, to cure my enemy of his hurts, and set him on his feet."

The man inclined his head and hurried back, calling to some of his companions. They lifted the silent form of Branner and carried it into the pavilion of Connoc Moran. The champion followed the body with his eyes, when a wild

shriek was heard, and Eva Le Fay was at his feet in the trampled lists.

"Champion," she cried, "you have the life of my brother in your hands. For the sake of one who will be alone in the world, for my father and mother have been dead long since, give me the life of Branner."

"Child," demanded the champion, kindly, "who art thou?"

"Eva Le Fay, the sister of Branner."

The victor looked at the delicate girl kneeling at his feet with a pitying smile.

"I sought not the life of Branner," he said. "Surely, if he had not outraged me and mine, this hand had never been lifted against him. But, child"—laying his mailed hand for a moment upon her bright head—"I know not what hurt your brother may have, but you may go to him, with the king's leave."

Eva looked at the king, who made a motion of assent. She sprang up, pressed her lips to the mailed hand of the knight, and was off like an arrow from a strong bow, while the champion turned again to the king. There stood Mari, the flush of conscious beauty upon her fair face.

"Champion," she said, "well and nobly have you won the prize of valor. Advance, and receive the chain."

He stepped forward, bent the knee before her, lower than he had done before the king, but did not move his visor.

"Stay," cried the king. "Since so well you have borne yourself, you should no longer hesitate to declare who you are."

"I shall not, king. My name may now be blazoned forth to all the world, for by your laws it is free from stain."

Without rising from his knees, he put up his hand and unclasped the fastenings of his helmet. The next moment the long waving hair flowed out from beneath the helmet as it was cast aside, and a great shout went up from every side as they saw the champion:

Not Connoc Moran, who was to have fought the battle for the honor of the Prince and his own, knelt at Mari's feet. Her heart gave a great bound, and the hand which held the golden chain trembled like an aspen leaf as she recognized the knight.

It was Ith Eogan!

Then the clamors rent the sky, and stooping, Mari laid the chain about his neck. As she did so their eyes met, and each knew the secret heart of the other. The two loved from that hour.

As Princess Mari drew back with the flush of love upon her face she heard a merry laugh at her elbow and turned and saw a slightly built man of middle age, of thin wiry figure and long pale face which in repose seemed to be sad. But when he laughed it was so infectious that no one could forbear joining him.

"By our sovereign majesty," he said, "we give our consent. Let the marriage vows be pronounced."

"Silence, there, Michael Magone," cried one of the princes who held with Branner.

"Ay, silence there," repeated this odd looking man suddenly producing a fool's cap and placing it on his head. "By Fingals foot the babbling of fools and courtiers is like that of an ever-running brook. It runs and runs and as it runs, continually doth run. Saving your presence, Lord of Cairnie, there are greater fools in the world than Michael Magone."

"How so, Michael?" demanded the king as the man with the fools privilege crowded his way close to his chair. "You have scarcely been seen in court of late."

"Because I, fool that I am, really mourn for Connor and Ruda," was the reply of Michael, who had been jester to the late king. "I have been wandering and hearing the talk of the people and I have decided that the Princess Mari must be the bride of Eogan."

"Peace, fool," cried the king, angrily.

"There can be no peace I warn you while Eogan and the king are at war. Ha, Prince; give you good-day. Hark, a word."

He stepped aside and whispered something in the ear of the Prince. Eogan started and looked at him fixedly and a broad smile appeared upon the face of the jester. The next moment he made a fantastic pirouette, whirled upon his heel and went back to the king. Then Eogan sprang into his saddle and even after his desperate battle, offered to hold the lists against the Craobh Ruadh or any stranger knight there present. Seven courses were run but there was not a man in all the host who could shake Eogan in the saddle. Ronald of the Scar the henchman of Connoc Moran, ran the best course with him, but lost a stirrup and was adjudged vanquished and Eogan remained master of the field.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORAN AND THE KING—THE DEADLY VAPOR.

"The vale with loud applauses rang."

—SCOTT.

LOUD and high rose the resounding cries of the men of Ulster at the sight of the face of their dear Prince, no longer suspected of crime,

but free from stain. Ladies clapped their hands and added their voices to the chorus of acclamation. In all that vast assembly there was but one lowering face, and that was the face of King Redmond.

"Where is Connoc Moran?" he said. "That man swore that he would fight with Branner in your place."

"King Redmond," replied Ith Eogan, as he rose. "Strong as I am, and able to guard my head in battle, I should be little more than a child in the hands of Connoc Moran when his strong knit sinews are not weakened by wounds. Struck down by a treacherous Druid, he would have died but for the skill of a learned leech who attends him. He is now, thanks to this man, able to ride, though not to bear his helm. If you would see him, he waits your pleasure."

"Why hath he not witnessed the combat? Surely such a knight as Moran ought to take delight in noble deeds."

"Hesaw the battle, oh king," was the reply. "Moran, gallant chieftain, advance and bend the knee to the king."

The person in the chair in front of the pavilion rose, threw aside his cloak, and the strong figure of Connoc Moran was revealed. He was richly dressed, and upon the breast of his silken tunic was embroidered the golden cross and clasped hands of his order. From the shoulder to the wrist his arms were bare, showing the play of his powerful muscles. His wrists were circled by heavy golden bands, and his feet shod by jeweled sandals. His head was bare, and his long hair had been arranged to cover the place where it had been cut away by the leech. This brave man, with an undaunted mien, crossed the open lists amid the murmured applause of the people, and stood before the king, to whom he made a slight obeisance.

"Thou art Connoc Moran?" asked Redmond, who could not repress an admiring glance at the noble presence of this warrior, who, outlaw as he was, without armor or weapons of any kind, dared to appear before him.

"Ay, King Redmond, I am that Moran, an outlaw and under ban. I greet thee. It had been my wish to meet Left-handed Branner myself, but a good Druid, whose body was so nicely severed in half by a good friend of mine, put it out of my power, for my leech will not let me wear my helmet."

"Thou art a bold outlaw, Moran," said the king.

"Sir king, I was not born to be an outlaw. An these vile Druids would let me rest, this hand of mine should never do harm to any man save in lawful combat. But I have taken the cross, and while this hand can be raised above the shoulder, it shall fall heavily upon all who smite for Bel and not for honor. Ah, thou villain, Aodh!" he cried, pointing his finger at the chief Druid, who stood by the king's chair. "Let me once put my hand upon thee and it shall not be well with thee."

The dark Druid only answered by a haughty look, for there was no coward blood in his veins.

"No quarrels on this day, or in my presence," exclaimed the king, sternly. "Moran, I grieve deeply that we have been enemies, for much would it please me to have this stalwart arm to strike for me."

"Free man have I lived for many a year," replied Moran. "My little realm, scarce twenty Irish miles across, hath in it only twelve thousand bold hearts, but there is not a man in all their number who is not a warrior, stanch and true. Give me good usage, and against Munster and Connaught I would even fight for thee. In my mountain passes I am king, and own no man master, save the king in Meath."

A gloomy look came into the face of the king, and he tapped angrily upon the platform below his chair. Then, with an effort he regained his composure, and said:

"Enough has been said. We give all a merry greeting, and hope that, before you return to your own land, you will break a lance with one of our strong knights. Much would it please me to see you run a course with Cairnie, Lord of Cavan, with Fiachra, or the good Prince Eogan."

"Much would I love it, king. And I have heard it said that your majesty bears a stout lance," replied Moran.

"Not so stout that I would care to meet you in angry battle," responded the king, with a laugh. Just then he turned his head and surprised a look which passed from Eogan to his daughter, a look so plain that even he could understand. The two loved each other, and it was hard to keep down the rage in his heart.

"Bid the harpers play," he cried. "We will to the banquet, to which these noble lords are bidden. What say you, Moran? Will your oath allow you to feast with me to-night?"

"Willingly, my lord the king, and thank you for your courtesy," replied Moran.

The procession was formed, and they returned to Emana. The Knights of the Clasped Hands joined and fraternized with those of the Craobh Ruadh, and all thought of war seemed to have passed away. The great banquet hall was filled that night, and all the splendor which Ulster

could show was brought out to do honor to the occasion. After the ladies had retired the wine flowed freely, and many a man went under the table before the feast was over. Then the visitors were assigned places in the palace, the guards were set, and sleep fell upon the scene.

Connoc Moran accompanied the young Prince to his apartments. His brow was overcast, and he seemed lost in thought.

"'Tis passing strange," he muttered. "Something warns me of danger, and yet it does not seem to me that the king would break his guarantee again."

"King Redmond is a man who does not strike with his own hand," replied the Prince. "One of his tools, slain by an invisible hand in this very room, will do his work no more; the serpent Branner hath lost his power to harm us, but the Druids have still the strength to do us evil, and Redmond would not lift a finger to prevent it."

The knight made no reply, but began to pace uneasily up and down the chamber. At this moment a slight grating sound was heard, the wall opened near the foot of the couch, and there stole into the room a masked figure.

"Aha!" cried the knight as the strange being made a peculiar sign. "Is it thou? What warning wilt thou give?"

"Ware the hand of Aodh," was the low reply. "Ware the stern chief of the Druids."

Without another word the figure receded, and the sliding panel closed behind it.

"My fears were not in vain," said Eogan. "The Druids, since they have seen me fight with the cross upon my shield, will hate me as they hate you. There is no safety for me in Emana while Redmond is king. But let it pass; our plans are well laid, and I will make my safety, sure. Let us go to rest."

They laid down, half dressed, upon couches opposite each other, and soon the measured breathing told that both slept. An hour later the panel again slipped aside, and a dark form crept in, bearing in one hand a sort of censer, which he set down between the two couches. From this an almost imperceptible vapor rose, with a sharp, pungent odor, which soon filled the entire room. Then, as if by invisible hands, the broad shutter which was placed before the latticed window slowly slid into its place, and the room was closer than ever.

Soon the breathing of the sleeping men changed. At first it grew louder, and then came in short fitful gasps, as for lack of air. Then there was a struggle, and both men lay silent and motionless upon the couches. A silence fell upon the chamber; the silence almost of death.

Again the panel opened, and the same dark figure stole in. This time he slowly approached the couch of Connoc Moran and looked into his face. It was set and stern, and the intruder with one hand grasped the hilt of a dagger, laid the other upon the face of the sleeper, and stood ready to strike the keen weapon into his heart if he moved.

But Connoc Moran lay silent, and with a joyful gesture the dark-robed man stole across the room and touched Eogan. He was also motionless, and the man, with his face still covered, went to the open panel and gave utterance to a low hiss. Scarcely had he done so when half a dozen men, draped like himself in sable, appeared at the secret entrance to the room.

Three of them lifted the form of Eogan and carried it through the opening; three others, but with great difficulty, did the like for Connoc Moran. The panel slipped into its place, and the awful deed was accomplished. The dark men, bearing their noble burdens, passed through many narrow passages, until, moving aside a stone, they stepped out in the midst of a grove of small trees outside the walls of the palace; in a cemetery which held the noble dead of the house of Connor.

The man who was acting as leader of the dark band paused, and taking up a small stone, tapped with it in a peculiar manner upon the marble of a tomb. Hardly had he done so, when, as if by magic, there started up on every hand men robed like the rest, who came forward in eager haste. Their pantomimic motions told their joy, as they looked upon the faces of the sleeping men.

"Take them up," whispered the leader, "and bear them away."

The motionless forms were laid upon litters, and in utter silence the band took their way toward the river. They reached it in half an hour, and here four large barges, each capable of holding thirty men, were brought into play. The oars were manned, and the boats swept down the river with muffled oars, until they reached a spot miles below, where a great wooded point came down to the water. Here they landed, and the leader of the party raised a horn to his lips and blew a loud, resounding blast.

It was answered. Down through the arches of the dark woods a great band of men came trooping. Dark-robed, silent men, marching in close order, they formed in solid column upon the river bank, and waited. The silent forms were again lifted, and with this great band, nearly five hundred in all, marching behind them, they entered the silent wood.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DRUID TEMPLE—THE SACRIFICIAL STONE.

Eogan awoke with a start and stared about him.

Where was he?

He had lain down to rest upon his couch in the palace at Emana; now above him great trees towered into the air, lit up by a hundred torches, and all about him he saw the men he most dreaded upon earth, the Druids!

He saw Connoc Moran, also starting as from sleep, raising himself upon his elbow to look about him.

A harsh, guttural laugh, which spoke of hellish joy, drew their attention, and Aodh stood before them, gloomy and fierce, his savage eyes regarding them with a look which meant no good to them.

"Now, Connoc Moran," he cried, "what think you of the Druids? Christian dog, slave of the Nazarene who died by the hands of the soldiers of Pontius Pilate, you shall see if the gods of the Druid have no power."

"God is but one," replied the Christian, sternly. "All the false and lying gods who were worshiped in your heathen groves have no power to shake my soul. God is but one!"

The Druid looked at him with a glance of mingled hate and admiration.

"You have a strong soul, Connoc Moran," he said, "but Bel demands a sacrifice, and he shall have it. Look about you, nay, stand up. There is no fear that you will escape."

The two gallant men arose, and realized more fully their situation. They were in the midst of one of those great groves which were dedicated to the service of the god Bel. The trees were of giant growth, for in this grove, centuries before, the bloody rites of their cruel worship were first pronounced. On every side dark scowling faces could be seen, and many of the band were hacked and mutilated by the axes and swords of the men of Moran.

"Thou seest," said Aodh. "These are the men whose brothers you cut down upon the plain of Emana."

"Yes, when like treacherous dogs they stole out upon me in the darkness. Think not, Druid, that your bloody rites can shake me. I laugh to scorn your cruel purpose, and if I am to die, will meet my fate so calmly that you must perforce honor the name of Christian."

"Bind them to the stone," cried Aodh. "Thou, Prince Eogan, hast also brought the doom upon thy head, in that, yesterday, you fought under the sign of the Christian, and the name of their God was shouted when you made your charge."

"Do thy worst, Druid; thou canst not make me blench," answered Eogan.

"Bel will have a worthy sacrifice," said Aodh. "Bind them to the stone, and let the invocation begin."

The two victims were dragged into the center of the grove, where stood a huge flat stone, rising six feet from the ground. Upon a column, leaning down upon the stone, stood the statue of the Druid god. The stone was stained here and there with the blood of sacrifice, for these were not the first victims who had been doomed to meet their fate here.

A hundred hands seized them and dragged them to the rock. Bound hand and foot, they were laid upon a stone platform raised above the surrounding rock, and the bloody rites began.

"Hear, oh Bel!" cried Aodh. "Here we bring an offering to thee, an offering after thine own heart. We bring thee men, strong and brave, warriors who have no stain except that they have fought against thee. Wilt thou accept the sacrifice which we bring?"

"No!"

The word came thundering from the lips of the statue of the god Bel. With wild yells of horror the Druids started back and looked at their god in confusion and alarm. They knew well that there must be some mistake. Whatever they might teach their votaries, they did not believe in the divinity of their god, or that his marble lips had the power to speak.

"Back!" thundered Aodh. "Fools that ye are, would ye fly from jugglery like to this?"

The Druids turned back at the word of their chief, and without speaking, though in manifest trepidation, took their places on the sacrificial stone, and again the chief priest lifted up his voice and addressed the statue.

"Bel," he cried, "hear thou the voice of thy servants. For many long years, since first we owned thy power, have we worked in thy service. We know well what is pleasing to thee, for often, when we asked it, thou gavest a sign. The blood offering hath ever been pleasant in thy sight and such an offering we give thee now. Say that this offering is good; let us have a sign which will show us that we labor not in vain, and spend our strength for naught. Here we bring thee two of the best and bravest knights in all the land, and offer them on thy altar. Say, then, shall their blood flow?"

"No!" thundered the same solemn voice.

"These two must not die."

Aodh, up to this time, had firmly believed that the first voice which he had heard was a mere fancy, but this time there could be no

mistake, and he stood looking at the image in blank astonishment while the other Druids crouched and shivered in dismay. For never, since first they did the work of their bloody god, had he opened his lips to them.

"This is some witchcraft," hissed Aodh. "It is not the voice of Bel which we have heard, for Bel never yet refused the offering of blood. To the death with them, then. Give me the knife and I will strike the blow."

"Wretch!" thundered the same voice, "would you refuse to work my will? Beware lest my disciples fall upon and slay you, if you hesitate. Bind the prisoners and lay them in the wood. Then let the council meet, and I will give them a sign."

Aodh glanced from face to face among his followers, and saw that they were all deeply impressed by the words of the god, and that it would not do to oppose his will further. Besides, he was at his wits' end, and could think of no plausible explanation of this strange event. The prisoners were lifted from their rocky bed and laid upon the earth under a giant tree, and the six chief men of the Druids met upon the rock. Aodh was depressed, and for a moment did not know how to begin. Believing, as he did, in the utter impotence of his god to do good or evil, he was surprised beyond measure at the events of the night. Once or twice he cast a furious look at the image towering above him, and it almost seemed as if there was a smile of derision upon the marble face.

"My brothers," he said, "we live in strange times, and it is not given to many among us, in any age, to receive such a sign as that which Bel hath given to us this night, if indeed Bel hath spoken. Let us address ourselves to him again, and see if he will speak."

He turned to the image again.

"Bel, thy orders are obeyed, and the prisoners are still alive. Why didst thou bid me hold my hand?"

"The hour hath not come," was the reply. "Not by night must these two die, but under the blazing sun at noon. I will speak no more, but woe to you if they die before the bell tolls twelve to-morrow."

"It is well," replied Aodh. "Remove them, my brothers. Take them to the lowest depth of the temple, and when the bell tolls twelve let them meet their fate."

"As I hope for safety in the great hereafter," whispered Eogan to Moran, as he lay, "it is the same voice which bade me drop the poisoned cup."

"Tis a good omen when Bel does not wish for blood," replied Moran, with a grim smile. "Let us see what the morrow will bring."

The Druids now came and bandaged their eyes, and they were lifted and borne away. Where they went they could not say, save that they were taken down a flight of steps. When the bandages were removed they lay upon couches of skins in a great vaulted room, upon the walls of which the pictured semblances of the sun, moon and stars were seen.

"It is a Druid temple," declared Moran. "Surely, you ought to know where."

"The Druids have many temples, but I think I know the place. It is five hours' march for infantry from Emana to this place, but a boat might come sooner."

"Then we came in that way. I wonder what hour of the night or day it may be."

But they could not know. The place in which they lay was lighted by lamps, and was probably under ground. Sleep was impossible to them, and the hours passed in talk of the plans which would be baffled if indeed the dark Druid carried out his will.

At length a door opened, and Aodh appeared upon the threshold.

"The time has nearly come," he said, with a grim smile, "but before you go I would fain know what you will do for the Druids if your plans work, and you gain the throne of your father?"

"What mean you?" demanded Eogan. "I am not likely to be king of Ulster soon."

"Sooner than you think, perhaps. Will you swear, if we let you go free, to uphold the faith of the Druids, and root out this new religion by the strong hand?"

"Never! I have come to make this my faith, and in it I will live and die."

"Thou bearest up strongly, and with such a king, who would give the Druids power, what might not be done. By heaven, the heaven you swear by, and which I half believe in, I would give much if you would be the friend of the Ancient Druids."

"It cannot be. Welcome death, even in the pride of youth and strength, sooner than join with your vile band. I know the cruel rites, and it seems strange to me that I should ever have consented to them."

"And to you I need not speak, Connoc Moran," cried Aodh. "I know thy thick-headed obstinacy but too well. Be it as you will, and in the name of my god, who hath spoken to me, I bid you forth to die."

A bitter laugh came to the lips of Connoc Moran.

"Go up and speak to your god now, and see if he will answer," sneered Moran.

Aodh dropped his head a moment. "Moran," he said, suddenly, tell me how to make the god speak, and so I live by bread you shall go free."

The Christian shook his head.

"The lips of Bel are dumb; come not to me to teach you how to open them."

"There is a trick here, and you know it," was the reply. "I am not such a fool as to believe that the words came from the lips of the marble god, but my followers are, and they would have killed me if I had not obeyed the warning voice. You knew this, none better than you, and laughed at the fools when they fled like sheep. I tell you again that if you will give me the power to make the stone speak, liberty is yours."

"Stop," said Connoc Moran. "If I will do this, will you let the Prince go free?"

"Both of you? No; that were too much."

"Not both, but the Prince alone. To save him from disgrace and death I come to Emana, even at the risk of my life, and here I am, ready to die, if it will do him good."

"Think not that I would accept the sacrifice, brave Moran. No, no, no! If we must die, let us die together, bold hearted to the last. Think not of any bargain which will set one of us free and not the other, for it cannot be so," declared Eogan.

"I might have known it," exclaimed Connoc Moran, with a look of joy. "Lead us out, Druid; you shall see how Christians can die."

They did not take the trouble to bandage the eyes of their prisoners as they led them forth to their doom. Through long passages, guarded on both sides by walls of marble, sculptured here and there, with the semblances of the god to whom this temple was erected, they passed on under guard. Their hands were bound, but their feet free, and they were surrounded by a compact body of the Druids, jealously watching them, fearing that they might escape. Thus they came out of the dark passage, and reached the open air. The bright sun, riding high in the open sky, had almost reached meridian, and they knew that the hour of their deliverance was near at hand; but it was the release which death brings, the happiest release of all to the unhappy, but not to them.

The Druids, as they emerged from the temple, began a chant in honor of the Sun-god, while they gathered around the stone of sacrifice. Some among them expected to hear the voice of the god, but contrary to their expectations, Aodh made no invocation, but at once prepared the victims and took up the great knife.

"We are here to do the will of the gods," he cried, raising the blade above the breast of Connoc Moran. "Thus the god of day, bright and glorious Bel, who looks down upon us while we labor, claims the sacrifice which we are glad to bring."

CHAPTER XVI.

TO THE RESCUE—THE GOD SPEAKS AGAIN—THE DESPERATE BATTLE.

THE palace at Emana was in wild confusion when morning broke.

The henchman of Connoc Moran, entering the apartments of the Prince to arouse his master, at an early hour, found his bed vacant, and at once the alarm spread. In a moment the word passed from mouth to mouth, and at once every man who could wield a weapon sprang to arms, and surrounded the palace, ready for insurrection.

"The king breaks his faith," cried a stalwart blacksmith, as he swung a heavy hammer in the air. "If the king cannot keep his guarantee, the king is not worthy to reign."

Aroused by the tumult, King Redmond hastily donned his clothing and armor, and came out into the court, surrounded by his guards. But, as he looked down into the open space before the castle, he realized that this was no common *emeute*, but a regular revolution.

"Give us back the Prince," cried the host of excited men. "Give us back Connoc Moran, oh king, or die the death!"

"By the faith of my fathers, Cormac," declared the king, "I know as little as you do how this hath chanced. Whoever hath stolen them away did it without my knowledge. No doubt, fearful of some wrong, they have taken flight."

"That is impossible. Neither the Prince nor Moran would leave their best armor behind. And see; all the knights of Moran are with the mob, and more than half of the Red Branch Knights as well. No, King Redmond; they have not gone of their own will."

"Bid them keep silence, and I will address them," said the king.

Cormac stepped out upon the balcony and stretched out his hand. Instantly a dead silence fell upon the crowd, for all knew and loved Wise Cormac.

"My friends," he said, "I think that you do the king wrong if you believe that he had aught to do with the disappearance of the two brave knights. Will ye hear the king?"

"Let him come forward and give us reasons good," cried Ronald of the Scar. "Our master has gone, and we will have him back, or you must render us a reason."

The king stepped to the front, and at once an

ominous silence fell upon the thronging multitude.

"Hear me, men of Emana, and you Knights of the Clasp'd Hands, listen. I swear by the faith of my father, by all I hold holy and true, by the bright sun above us, and the sacred temples of our worship, that I do not know where the Prince and Connoc Moran have been taken."

"That may well be," cried Ronald of the Scar, "and yet your tools may have done the work."

"Not with my knowledge, sir knight. I will do all I may to find them and bring them safe to Emana. Knights of the Red Branch, mount at once, and divide into bands of one hundred. Leave no place unvisited, and come back at sunset for fresh orders if you do not find them before that time."

The order, delivered in the tone of command natural to the king, had its effect. The Red Branch Knights were seen to detach themselves from the crowd and make for the stables. At the same time a lithe figure was seen to steal through the crowd and touch the henchman of Connoc Moran on the arm. The worthy turned to the person who had touched him, and bent his ear while the man whispered to him.

Ronald of the Scar after hearing the man, uttered a low cry of delight, and shouted to the Knights of the Clasp'd Hands:

"To me, cross-bearers; to me, sons of Connoc Moran. And you, men of Emana, to your homes at once, and keep quiet until you hear from me again."

The Red Cross Knights heard the call and at once broke away from the crowd, and in ten minutes were riding out of the great gate, armed at every point, and eager for the work before them. Holding by the stirrup of Ronald of the Scar, and keeping up with apparent ease, was the man who had spoken to him in the crowd. They took a course direct for the river, and when there the knights forded the stream and dashed down the western bank at furious speed, the runner still keeping pace with them. His face was closely masked.

"Thou art a stanch runner," cried Ronald. "Faith, thou shalt never rue this day's work if we come in time."

The man did not look up, but still continued to ply his active limbs. The jingling of their armor sounded through the bright day as they dashed on. For three hours they kept up their headlong pace, and many a horse showed signs of failing, but the man running beside Ronald of the Scar was fresh as at the start.

"Good blood, good blood, man!" said Ronald. "Are we nearly there, my friend?"

"Scarce half a league. Yonder lies the wood, and now push on in the name of God. Spare not the spur, my masters, for if the Druid's horn is heard before we reach the wood, our strength is spent in vain, and we can only take revenge."

The pace now became furious. Two or three horses fell, but the riders rose, and clasp'd their weapons, kept up with the rest as well as they could. Ronald looked up at the sun and saw that it had nearly reached meridian, but the wood was gained at last.

"Dismount," hissed the guide. "Leave your horses here and come on, for there is not a moment to lose."

Every man sprung from the saddle, drove his lance into the earth and made his bridle fast to it. The work was done in a moment and they were quickly threading the mazes of the wood. At this instant the first sound of the distant horn was heard, and with a wild cry the guide bounded into the woods and was gone. At the same moment a low solemn chant sounded through the woods, and they rushed forward eagerly.

The knife of Aodh was raised above the breast of Connoc Moran, when from the lips of the statue thundered out the words:

"Hold thy hand, Aodh! Strike not, or dread my wrath."

Aodh paused with his hand in the air and a furious look came into his face.

"False god," he cried, "I defy thee; these men shall die."

Just then a whistling sound was heard and the hand of the Druid fell to his side, and they saw the feathered shaft of an arrow driven through and through the forearm.

"To arms!" he shouted, springing from the rock. "The enemy is upon us."

As he spoke, the gleam of armor was seen amid the trees, and Ronald of the Scar, followed by the more fleet among his companions, sprung upon the rock. In an instant the arms of the prisoners were at liberty, and they were in the midst of their friends.

"Back, back!" thundered Ronald. "Leap from the rock and join the rest."

They sprung from the rock together, and the knights formed in a circle about the rescued men. Scarcely had they done so when, armed with pikes, swords and knives, the Druids came pouring in upon them.

"Give me a sword!" cried Ith Eogan; "an ax—anything. Hal! this will do!"

He caught an ax from the thigh of a knight who had his sword in his hand, and rushed to the front. The same was done by Connoc Mo-

ran, and these two brave men, their noble breasts bare, took their places in the front rank.

"Give them shields, you in the rear!" cried Ronald. "Bear them back there, the bloody dogs; give point and edge!"

Two shields were passed to the front, and under their cover the two unarmed knights fought as valiantly as if they had been clad in mail. Furious at their loss, the enemy turned all their strength against these two gallant men. Their weapons seemed charmed, and though a dozen pikes were leveled at them at once, they had not been touched. Aodh, who could not use his right arm, thundered anathemas upon his men if they dared to turn their backs. Wild cries rent the air, and in the midst of it the small body of knights slowly retreated, leaving a track of blood behind them. But they were hard beset by their foes, who made up in numbers what they lacked in discipline and armor.

Many a ghastly wound was given and received, and five of the Christian warriors had gone down to rise no more before they reached the border of the wood where their horses stood. Once in the saddle, they could laugh at their foes, and they furiously rushed out of the wood.

But a great surprise awaited them here. The horses, one and all were gone, and the shrill laughter of Aodh was heard ringing through the woods.

"Down with them, my brave ones!" he cried. "Already they grow faint."

The spears still stood upon the spot where the horses had been. Half the number of unwounded knights caught them up and formed a ring, the lances pointing outward, and their companions standing between, ready to strike with sword or ax. Up to this time the sharp pikes of the Druids had given them an advantage, but now they were kept at bay by the push of the long lance.

But now a new enemy appeared. The natives of that part of the country, nearly all followers of the Druid faith, were seen running up from all directions, armed with bows and slings, and soon a thousand men surrounded the valiant band of heroes who ringed about Eogan and Moran. And now the arrows and stones began to fly in blinding showers, and the force of the Irish sling was terrible. Such was their skill, that at twenty paces they never missed the mark, and the spears were shivered and the targets rung as the deadly shower poured in. Already an arrow had passed through Eogan's exposed thigh, and Moran's arm was partially disabled by the blow of a stone, hurled by one of the slingers.

"Stand up, my brave men!" cried Moran. "Whether we live or die, let us die with arms in our hands."

But the numbers of the enemy, in spite of the slaughter which was made by the more finished weapons of the knights, grew greater each moment. For every one who fell, two seemed to spring up from the earth to take his place. The wild, exultant shout of the Druid rose on every hand, and the voice of Aodh, who held aloft his bleeding arm to show his votaries the injury which had been done him by these Christians, was heard exhorting them to valor.

"Now strike once more, companions!" cried Moran. "One good blow for the cross which we bear, and we may yet conquer."

But the hope seemed small. The enemy, keeping well out of the way of the lances and swords, poured in a shower of missiles of all descriptions, which, while but rarely fatal, inflicted severe wounds, and in many cases utterly disabled the warriors for the time being. Incited by Aodh, the kerns directed the hottest fusillade at the point where Moran and Ith Eogan stood. Both of them had been struck several times, and had it not been for the efforts of two or three knights, who did nothing save cover the two unarmed men with their shields, they would doubtless have been slain ere this. Still the wild yell of the Druids swelled through the summer air, and still the knights pressed on toward the river, hoping against hope that some help would come to them. All about them their active enemies leaped and shouted, and even the stout-hearted Ronald began to despair.

"Oh for fifty of our good mountain archers, but fifty, and I would scatter these devils like chaff before the wind. Hal! what is that?"

A wild trumpet peal was heard, and a troop of knights of the *Craobh Ruadh*, two hundred strong, came charging from behind a little grove of larch and oak. At their head, his pennon fluttering in the breeze, and his armor flashing in the sun, rode Fiachra. Then the enemy broke and fled in all directions, and the field was won.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE KING BREAKS HIS GUARANTEE.

CHEER upon cheer rent the air as the rescued men were surrounded by their gallant deliverers.

"Who is guilty of this shameful act, Sir Connoc?" cried Fiachra. "Speak, and quickly."

"Aodh the Druid. He alone is to blame, and woo to him if he comes within reach of my arm," was the reply of Connoc Moran.

"Yonder he goes," cried Fiachra. "To me,

Knights of the Red Branch. Let us run the reptile to earth."

"No, Fiachra," replied Eogan. "Let the man go, for his power to do evil has nearly passed. And for these simple people, who were urged by mad fanaticism to assail us, let them go in peace."

"Where is the man who brought us news of your danger?" asked Ronald of the Scar. "I have not seen him since he led us into the Druid grove."

"Then do not search for him," replied Connoc Moran. "Was he not a small man, masked, who ran with the speed of a grayhound?"

"The same."

"He will take care of himself, then. If we had our horses we would bid good-by to Ulster and Emana for many a day."

"No, Sir Connoc, you must go to Emana, for I would not answer for the safety of King Redmond if we do not bring you back. For his own safety, the king demands your presence," said Fiachra.

"Not another night will I sleep in the palace at Emana. Whether the king is to blame or not I cannot say, but I will take my chances in my own tents, with the knights of my faith about me sooner than in the palace. But to Emana I will go, and satisfy the people, and then I will go to my own land."

Boats were found upon the river and in these the Knights of the Cross embarked, carrying their wounded with them, and the Red Branch Knights rode along by the river bank, their numbers being augmented from time to time by bands coming back from the search, so that, by the time they crossed the ford within half a mile of Emana, nearly five hundred well-appointed knights were in the train. The trumpets sounded, the harps rung out, and the people of Emana poured out to meet them. From the highest towers of the castle King Redmond saw them come, and he knew that the search had been successful, and the two he so hated saved from death.

"Where is Murtagh the Rider?" he demanded turning to an attendant. "Bid him come to me quickly."

The man sent for came at the bidding of the king, who went apart with him for a short time. Then the man descended, got his horse, and rode out of the postern gate of the castle and scoured across the plain.

"Let them come," muttered the king. "We shall see what will happen when that great power is turned against them. If I cannot be king over these two, as well as all else in Ulster, I will lie in my grave."

At this moment a light form glided to his side, and turning, he saw Eva Le Fay.

"Good-day, little maid," he said. "How fares it with Branner?"

"He is well enough in body, but sorely hurt in mind, my king. He asks you from your grace to give him leave to go to his own land, to rest and recruit himself."

"Go you with him, Le Fay?"

"I must, my king," she answered.

"I would not lose you, Lady Eva. Troubled as I am by many enemies, I would have you near me. Why does Branner leave me and go to his own land?"

"Because he says that while Prince Eogan is here, it is a constant reproach to him, and he hath measured swords with him often enough to know that Eogan is his master. It is better for all that he should go, and at once."

"I cannot give him leave," replied the king, coldly. "He is still the prisoner of Ith Eogan, and must not go without leave from him."

"You know right well, King Redmond, that if you ask his life from Ith Eogan it will be given you freely," she cried, in a spirited tone.

"You will not understand me, Lady Eva. I do not care how far or how fast Branner goes, but you must stay with me. In all this jangle of evil, when the heart of my own daughter is turned from me and goes out to my enemy, I look into your eyes and have some little peace."

"Is it so?" she said, softly. "Can I give you any comfort, Redmond, my king?"

"Ay, can you, sweeting. Wilt thou leave me now?"

"Let me go to my brother—"

"No need, no need," said the quiet voice of Branner, who had entered softly. "If Redmond of Clare wants you, Eva, you shall stay, and I will go alone. I do not fear to leave you, my sister, in that I know you right well. Before I go, my king, I say to you that I shall work as well for you in my own land, better, perhaps, than I can here."

"Then you do not give over the struggle?" asked the king.

"I? They little know the man called Branner if they think that he will ever forget or forgive an injury. While there is life in my body, I shall hate Eogan, and when the time comes, I shall strike. It will not be long, king, before you shall hear from me again."

He turned upon his heel and went down into the court, where he met Eogan just entering.

"I thought to have seen thee before, Branner," said the Prince, hastily. "Thou art free; go thy ways in peace."

Branner inclined his head slowly by way of

reply, and left the palace. Half an hour later, attended by only five knights, he rode out of Emana, and was not seen again for many a day.

Redmond came down to meet the rescued men, and greeted them warmly enough.

"Thou art popular in Ulster, good Prince," he said, "and thou canst hardly tell what a wasp's nest buzzed about our ears when it was known in Emana that thou wast gone. It had like to have grown into a revolt."

"There can be little peace for you while we remain here," replied Eogan. "Give me leave to go, I and my following, and I will conquer a kingdom for myself. Or, if thou wilt make me thy Righ Damhna, and give me the Princess Mari as my wife, I will never rebel against thee, and thou shalt reign in peace while thou livest."

"I will make no bargain with thee, Prince. Go in peace, and if it please you at some time to make head against me, try your strength."

"Come with me," said Connoc Moran. "In my land you may find a home, Prince."

"Thou hast been a father to me, Sir Connoc; I will go," was the answer.

"As for the Princess, Eogan, bear in mind that she is not for thee," declared the king.

"I have chosen her," was the quiet reply.

"She knows that I love her, and there is not power enough in Ulster to force her to be another's bride. In that I defy thee, King Redmond."

"But that thou hast my guarantee, Eogan, I would strike thee to my foot. Away; three days I give thee, and then thou art an outlaw; and it shall be a merit for the hand which, by any means, shall take away thy life."

The Prince laughed lightly, and waving his hand to the courtiers, strode through the long halls to his own apartments. He was quickly joined by Fiachra, and while the preparations for departure were hurried, the two were engaged in close consultation. The sun had not yet set, when, with five hundred men in his train, a hundred of them wearing spurs of gold, the Prince rode out of the gates of the castle which was a home to him no more. As he reached the plain he turned his eyes aloft, and saw Mari standing on the broad balcony, her hands clasped, looking down at him with eager eyes. He made her a gesture which spoke of perfect love and faith, and rode on at the head of his troop.

"Go, thou vile traitor," cried the king, as he saw the glittering cavalcade pass over the plain. "But you little know that you ride to death."

There was a strange silence in Emana. The people saw the Prince ride away, and knew that he was banished, but they felt that he would come again, if his life was spared. The king could see burning discontent in many faces, and knew that he walked over the crater of a volcano, which might at any time engulf him. Restless, uneasy, he knew not why, he sent for his daughter, and she came.

"Mari," he said, when they were alone, "canst thou never forgive me for the time when I forgot myself and would have let the Druids take vengeance upon those who insulted me?"

"I have forgiven you, my father."

"I must have obedience too, Mari," he declared.

"That thou shalt have in all things that do not touch my soul. As my father, you are entitled to all my obedience, but there are things which are for me to decide and not for you."

"Look to it, girl, that your will does not run counter to mine. You have dared to look with favor upon a man whom I hate with a deadly hatred, because a prophecy hath said that if he lives he will reign. Before he went away he said that if I would make him my Righ-Damhna, and give you to him for his wife, he would not trouble me the throne while I lived."

Mari clasped her hands, and a look of joy came into her face. "Why—" she began to say when he stopped her.

"You would ask why I, who dread the influence of this boy, do not accept his offer, but I will tell you. Such is his power in Ulster, and especially in Emana, where he is best known, that there is no safety for me. Even if he wished to keep his word, his friends would not allow him to rest. He would be called to the throne, and a revolution would ensue."

"Eogan is a true man, and would not aid any such rebellion. Nay, he would put it down by the strong hand."

"You are mad, Mari. What man is there, with a crown and scepter in view, who would not fold his hands and allow his friends to put these baubles in his grasp? But fear not, fear not. When Ith Eogan left Emana he went to his death. Before to-morrow's sun shall set, he, and all with him, the outlaw Connoc Moran among them, will lie dead beside the sea of Moyne."

"Father, father, have you betrayed them again?" she gasped.

"Ay. Shall I live forever with this fear hanging over me? No, by the sun, moon and stars, I will not."

Mari threw up her hands in a wild despairing gesture. Then she put her hands into her long

hair and threw it back over her shoulders, and looked wildly at her father.

"The light of prophecy is upon me, my father," she cried. "As you have broken faith, so shall it be with you in the day when you most need the aid of all your friends. One you have loved and trusted, one upon whose faith you would pin your own, shall be the one to strike you to his feet. I see a great battle, and in it the hosts of Emana are scattered, and then a kingly form lies dead, a dagger in his throat. And that blow, oh king, will be struck by one you deem your friend."

"Now curses on your head, mad girl, if you do not cease your railing. Away, or by the blue sky above us I will strike you dead. If I die, at least it will be in battle, and my death will be kingly, with my harness on my back."

"Your plans will be naught," she answered. "Woe, woe, woe to our house, since the king will break his faith."

"A guard here, ho!" shouted the king. A captain presented himself.

"The Princess is under guard," said the king.

"Take her to her own apartments and place her under arrest. Send away her maids of honor, save only Eva Le Fay, and bid Eva come to me here."

Mari, turning a lofty look upon her father, was led out by the captain. A guard was placed before her door, and she was a prisoner in her own apartments. Two days passed, and a courier was seen spurring across the plain from the north. It was the rider Murtagh bringing news of battle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BRANNER'S TREACHERY—THE PIRATES OF FORMORIA.

THE gallant band of Prince Eogan, with flaunting banners and gleaming spears, bearing their shields bravely, marched on to the north. The first night they camped upon a mountain slope and feasted upon the meat which the wood furnished them—venison and the flesh of the wild boar, washed down with generous draughts of red wine. The men were in high spirits, and spoke of the days to come, when they would win a kingdom for themselves, and there set up the banner of the cross and the ospray.

"We are not yet out of Ulster," said Connoc Moran. "I wish that our galleys may be safe where we left them."

"What should harm them?" replied Ronald of the Bear.

"I know not," was the uneasy reply; "and yet I do not feel safe. Woe to us if these galleys are not riding at anchor."

"Bah," responded Ronald. "With our good blades and shields advanced we would carve out a path to our own land."

At early morning they again took up the march toward the sea, where their galleys had been left in charge of a few stout sailors. The fleet of Connoc Moran was not large, but it was famed through all that coast for daring deeds. What man in all the land was borne down and oppressed who had not faith that the cross of Moran would come to his aid, if conjured in the name of honor? Many a weak prince had been set firmly in his place by the power of his hand. The pirates from Formoria feared him, and when they saw the cross and clasped hands fluttering from his masthead, they sought safety in flight, daring pirates though they were.

Moran, when he sent his defiance to King Redmond, was at Rathlin island with his galleys. The place had been held by a body of Formorian pirates, but they had taken flight when Moran came in sight, for although of greater force, they did not dare to meet him. The galleys had been anchored under the island, and Moran, with his hundred knights, had marched to bid defiance to Left-handed Branner.

At early morning the camp was astir, and advancing their banners, marched on to the sea-coast. As they went the people came out of their villages, and when they saw the Ospray, the standard of Prince Eogan, in the van, they cheered them until the forest rung. The banner of Moran brought as much enthusiasm; for often had he driven the pirate bands from the coast, and saved them from plunder and death. Outlaw though he was, they knew and honored him.

The noonday sun was high above their heads when the sea began to show through the trees, and reaching a pass between the hills they passed through, mounted another eminence, and stood upon a hill which sloped toward the sea. A long bowshot distant, separated from the shore by a narrow channel, lay the Isle of Rathlin, its two long arms extended, inclosing the bright bay, in which the galleys lay at anchor. The bay faced the south, and a shout of joy went up as they saw their fleet lying under the shelter of the projecting headlands.

"You had no cause for fear, my master," said Ronald. "By heaven, since you spoke of it last night, it hath been heavy upon my mind."

"Send forward a trumpet, and give them a signal," ordered Moran. "I am more pleased than thou to see them safe."

A trumpeter ran down to the beach, and

raised his instrument to his lips. As the long blast rung out across the sea men were seen to start up upon the decks, and all the galleys showed signs of life.

"Who are those men?" cried Moran. "We left them not here."

As he spoke a man in armor stepped out in full view upon the deck of the nearest galley and threw up the visor of his helmet. They saw the face of Left-handed Branner, and yells of rage arose from the ranks of the Christians.

"Thou vile dog!" shouted Moran, "evil was the hour when thou wast born, sad the day when thy life was spared."

"Thou hast the right to anger, Connoc Moran," replied Branner. "I had need of these galleys, and so I took them."

"Where are my sailors?" demanded Moran.

"Where are my brave sea children?"

"Ask the fishes at the bottom of the sea," was the reply; "they know best."

"I will come and ask you, when the tide goes down," replied Moran. "It is not long before we can reach you through the sea."

The rocky isle resounded with the mocking laughter of Branner as he answered:

"If we wait for the tide, my masters; but we are not such fools."

"Coward! will you not give me the chance to claim my own?"

"Not I," replied Branner. "They are but fools who for that word, honor, forsake the advantage they have gained. In an hour we will be upon the sea, and it will not be long before you have work before you, enough to give you bitter need of valor."

The men who had stolen the fleet of Moran now began to work. While the tide was high it was impossible to reach the island, but when it went down the water would not rise above a warrior's thigh. No one knew this better than Connoc Moran, and he grew wild with rage as he heard the creaking of the rude machinery which raised the anchors of the galleys.

"Death of my life," he hissed, "if we escape the meshes of this net and ever find you, vile traitor, it shall not be well with you."

Branner made no reply, but urged his men to their work. The anchors were got up, and without attempting to raise their sails, they put out the oars, and one by one the long black galleys slipped out of the opening of the bay, crossed the broad sound close to the island, and were lost to sight behind it.

"Tis a plot of Redmond to keep us in his country until the ban of outlawry can fall upon us all," muttered Connoc, bitterly. "Well, be it so; but better had it been for him that he had never wronged us."

"This plot has some other meaning," cried Eogan. "Doubt not that when we turn back, as we must do, we shall find lions in the path. But fear not that those who march beneath the Ospray will quail. I have gaged them all, and I have not a craven in my band."

"That great coward who now sails away in my good galleys shall one day feel my power. Which way shall we turn?" demanded Moran.

"To Lena first; there I shall find friends who at my word would fight even King Redmond. Let me have a kerne who will bear a message for me."

A boy came forward, half-clad, bare-footed, and with his shock of unkempt hair flying in the breeze.

"Know you the Lord of Lena?" demanded Eogan.

"He is my master," replied the boy.

"Go to him, then, as quickly as you can. Say to him that Left-handed Branner hath stolen our galleys, and that we march for Lena. Say that we seek no battle with any men, but that we will reach the mountain home of Connoc Moran, if we have to cut our way through the lines of the *Craobh Ruadh*. You need say no more."

The boy, without another word, sprang away upon his errand, and the Christians turned in their tracks and at once commenced their march. Seeing this, the black fleet again stood in toward the coast.

"Halt!" cried Moran. "Pitch our banner here, for if Branner comes back to Rathlin's Isle, we will not go to Lena."

"Ha! look yonder," responded Eogan.

"Branner hath good reason to turn back."

Upon the distant horizon, close down to the water's edge, a hundred black spots showed in the sunlight. Moran uttered a shout of joy.

"I had never thought that the time would come when I would welcome the Formorian pirates to our coast," he said. "They are driving Branner back into our very clutches."

The fleet of Branner kept on toward the coast, with the exception of one galley, which came slowly up into the wind and lay idly on the waves, as if waiting for the coming of the pirates.

"Look yonder, Eogan. Branner waits for the coming of the red-haired men of Formoria. That is the fleet of Testig, and the red-haired king does not love me. Let him come, and he will. We will give him such a welcome as will make him wish that he might quickly see the long shores of his native land."

The fleet of the pirates came up rapidly and

was joined by the galley of Branner. That base-hearted wretch was seen to step from the deck of his galley to that of the enemy, and there were a few moments' hesitation upon the part of the pirate fleet. Then they came on, in the midst of strange, barbarous sounds, and the decks were seen black with men, who tossed their shields and shouted their war-cries as the long galleys swept into the space between the mainland and the island.

"To the saddle, gallant knights," cried Moran. "Set forward the red-cross banner; Tostig and his men have seen it shine before, and will not love it now."

The Knights of the Clasp'd Hands set up a cheerful shout, in which they were joined by the young knights who followed Eogan. The hoarse war-cries of the men of Tostig made reply as they pushed their long galleys toward the shore. At twenty paces distant they grounded, and the men began to leap into the water, while the knights sat like statues on their horses, and allowed a band of three or four hundred to form upon the beach.

"Down with your lances, good Knights of the Clasp'd Hands!" cried Moran. "Hold your men, Prince; we will give them a chance to charge."

The long lances of the men of Moran came down, and urging their horses, they charged down the long slope upon the half-formed body of red-haired pirates, while their tremendous battle cry, "For God and Moran!" struck terror to the hearts of the invaders. Swept back, pierced by the long lances, overthrown and trampled under foot, in three minutes the heathen band which had reached the shore was annihilated, and not a man of the brave knights had gone down.

"Coward!" shouted Moran, shaking his long lance at Branner, who was yet upon the deck of his galley. "Come and face me like a man."

Branner made no pause, but urged on the landing of the Formorians. The fate of their comrades had roused all the evil passions in their natures and a body of men, nearly eight hundred in number, were already in the water and rushing toward the shore, filling the air with darts and javelins as they advanced. The knights, throwing their broad shields to the front to cover them from the shower of javelins, made a circuit and gained a place half-way up the slope, from which they could charge again.

"Room, Moran, room!" cried Eogan. "Leave these men to us."

"They are yours, Prince," was the reply.

"Give a good account of them."

"Now for the honor of the Ospray banner, knights," cried Eogan, turning to his men. "Many times before have these red-haired dogs assailed us, and many a time have we made widows and orphans in the land of the Formorian. To your work, my good knights, level your lances and follow me."

The Danes and their allies had already obtained a lodgment on the beach, when the men of Ulster began to move. At first they proceeded at a slow trot, with their lances raised on high, but at the shout of the warlike Prince they bent forward in their saddles, leveled their long lances, and amid the din of the Irish drums and the fierce battle-cries of the pirates, they charged!

The enemy had obtained a better foothold this time, and were in greater numbers, and with locked shields and spears advanced met the charge right nobly. But as the long line of lances came shivering in, even their strong line wavered. They gave back a little and the line was broken. Then it was, that, casting away their splintered lances, the young knights drew their swords and began to use them as only the Irish warrior knew how. Vain was the interposition of the huge orb'd shield when their sweeping brands came down. The dead lay in heaps upon the edge of the sea, and Branner saw with ill-concealed terror that the pirates were giving way.

"Down with them!" cried Eogan, as he clove a tall marauder to the teeth. "For the honor of Ulster, my brave knights. Ha! Let them feel your power."

As he spoke his brand again swept the air, and another of the pirates, literally cut in twain, fell dead before him. At that terrible sight the enemy broke and fled, pursued even into the water by the eager knights. But the sound of a horn, winded by Connoc Moran, called them back, and they wheeled into line again upon the mossy slope.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEATH OF AVALUS—AN UNEXPECTED BLOW.

"Gallantly done, my noble Prince," cried Connoc. "Their dead lie in heaps upon the ground over which you passed. But they come again. Divide your men and give the command of two hundred to my good Ronald. Wilt follow him, young knights?"

"They will do as I bid them," replied Eogan, as he told off two hundred of his knights and bade them follow Ronald of the Scar. There was need of it, for the enemy, seeing their mistake in attempting to force a landing at a single point, and allowing the knights to concentrate

their forces, had divided into three parts. Only enough men were left aboard the galleys to move them in case of attack, and the rest of the pirate force, three thousand in all before the first attempt to land, but now numbering scarcely two thousand available men, divided into three columns of nearly equal force and rushed toward the land at as many different points. At the head of the first column, his raven banner fluttering in the breeze, and his long red hair floating out from beneath the iron cap which he wore, came Tostig, the Formorian king, one of the bravest of the Scandinavian chiefs who troubled the shores of Erin in those days. At the head of each of the three detachments marched a chosen leader, and Branner was in the ranks beside the king.

Ronald of the Scar, with his two hundred knights, prepared to meet the detachment on the left, Eogan faced the one upon the right with the same number, and Moran, followed by his own hardened warriors and a hundred men of Ulster, stood up against the central host led by the king and Branner. As before, they waited until the pirates were in confusion in the act of forming, and then the three strong bands charged together, making the earth shake under their horses' feet.

On the right, the lances of Eogan quickly broke through the half formed line of the enemy, and drove them along the beach until they again joined the central body. Gallant deeds were done, and heroes died gloriously. On the left brave Ronald drove the red-beards before him, piercing them with his long lances, and forcing them to join the main body.

But the wary king of the pirates stood in the center. He saw that if they could reach solid ground all might be well with them, and the instant they landed, Tostig, Branner, and a dozen of the best and bravest, darted hastily forward, and took a position a hundred yards up the slope, where they were quickly joined by five hundred men, who formed in solid order upon the slope and waited for the charge of Connoc Moran.

It came—a hurricane which it seemed they could not resist on foot. But they were tough and hardy warriors, and not a man of all their troop but was clad in chain mail from top to toe and was resolute and determined. In the center stood Tostig, a grim old heathen, whose years were not so many but he could fight a valiant battle yet, and in his own land he had never been matched. About his standard stood his seven tall sons, each a valiant warrior, worthy of the days in which he lived.

"Ha, Tostig," cried Connoc Moran, as the troop came down at a gallop, "welcome, welcome to our soil."

"I give thee greeting," replied Tostig. "Well met, Connoc Moran."

And he hurled a keen javelin with rare strength and skill, straight at the throat of Moran. The brave knight received it on his shield, but such was the power of Tostig's mighty arm, that the target was pierced like paper, and the javelin, half checked in its course was broken against Moran's gorget.

"Well cast, old Tostig," shouted Moran, rising erect again. "Ha! sweep me away this rabble my merry men; down with the red-bearded dogs."

But Tostig and his seven brave sons, aided by Branner, a good knight and man-at-arms, valiantly held the ground, and in vain Connoc Moran sought to break through, for the brave pirates linked their shields together, while behind them the bowmen worked rapidly, and the javelins hissed through the air, sent with all the force of the Viking's arm.

It was only for a little that Tostig needed to hold his ground, and that little time was quickly gained, and every man of the Norse army reached the shore and joined with the forces of their king. And eighteen hundred men, brave and skillful warriors, stood arrayed against the Knights of the Clasp'd Hands.

"Ha, Branner," thundered Moran, as he took his ax in his hand. "Thou wilt not come to me; take that for quittance."

He suddenly raised the short, keen curtal ax and poising it a moment, hurled it straight at the head of Branner. The movement was so sudden that the henchman had not time to interpose his shield before the weapon, turning once in the air, struck him on the forehead. He threw up his arms and fell at the feet of Tostig. His own men made a rush, caught up his body, and dashed back through the water to their galleys and put him aboard, barely escaping a charge of Eogan's knights as they plunged into the flood.

The knights drew back a little and left an open space between the armies, hoping that the enemy would break their ranks, but they stood firm.

"Who is there among you has faith in the power of his arm?" cried Moran. "Let him come out and meet me, on foot, between the lines."

At the word out sprung Avalus, the eldest son of Tostig, a man known and feared all along the coast of Ulster. Connoc Moran sprung down, armed only with sword and shield, and ran to meet him and their shields clanged fierce-

ly together as they met. Moran sprung back a pace, and raising his heavy shield, dashed it with all his force against that of Avalus.

The strong pirate felt all the power go out of his arm at that terrible shock, and for the moment he could not hold it up. At that instant when his head was no longer covered by the shield, Connoc raised his sword as if to cut him down through the helmet, and he raised his blade to ward off the blow. Then, by a sudden movement, Moran changed the direction of the blow to a thrust, aimed at the throat, above the gorget. True to the mark the keen point sped, and was deeply buried in the throat of the grim son of Tostig, who came crashing to the earth while, with a bound Moran gained the ranks of his own men and sprung into the saddle. At a signal trumpet they wheeled and rode back a hundred yards, while Eogan and Ronald, to whom this was a signal also, drew off their men, and the whole force of knights were massed upon the slope.

Their loss had not been heavy. Clothed as they were in complete mail, and fighting upon horseback, they had escaped with comparatively little loss.

"Shall we charge them once again, my heroes?" cried Moran. "There is little to be gained, and I think we have given them a lesson."

"Sir Connoc," replied Eogan, "a word in your ear first."

The two conferred a moment and then Ronald was called into the conference.

"By my faith, the plan is a good one," he cried. "To it, then."

"Pass the word from man to man, and let all understand what we mean to do."

A low murmur through the ranks of the knights spoke their applause at the bold proposition of the Prince. All knew right well that in their march to Lena they must fight, for by this time the king would have secured all the passes, and it was only by desperate fighting that they could break through.

The troop formed in a solid body, sixty lances in the front, and faced the waiting pirates. Then they broke to the right and left in two sections, and rode down as if to take the enemy upon both flanks, and those skillful warriors quickly changed their line and massed about the standard. The next moment the horsemen dashed by upon both sides, at full speed.

"Keep your line, my heroes," cried Tostig. "The dogs think to coax us into chasing them, but it will not do."

Straight for the sea the horsemen held their way, and their speed was awful, and increasing at each moment. Then, to the utter wonder of the pirates, who up to this moment had not even suspected their object, they plunged into the water and dashed through it, straight for the waiting galleys. When too late, the king realized the meaning of the movement, but their line had not yet been broken when they saw the knights board their galleys and rapidly overpower the few men left upon the decks. Before the pirates had reached the water's edge all their galleys were in motion, for the cables were cut at once, and a few strokes of the oars put them into deep water.

There were thirty galleys in all, with the exception of those of Branner, which were nowhere to be seen. Once out of reach of the enemy, Moran looked for his own ships, and saw that they were gone. Branner, not badly hurt after all, had taken advantage of the battle to work his way to the other side of the island, and his ships were mere specks upon the distant horizon.

"Cowards," screamed Tostig, as he ran up and down the shore, nimble as a boy. "Come back and fight us."

"We have left our mark upon you," replied Moran. "If it is a fight you seek, look behind you."

The king turned, and upon the crest of the hill just behind him, bathed in the glory of the setting sun, he saw a mighty army, at least a large one for those times. It was the army of the Prince of North Munster, hereditary enemy of Connoc Moran, who had been advised of his march by King Redmond, and hastened to cut him off.

"There is work for you, red-beard," shouted Moran. "Be thankful that I do not land and take you in the back."

The galleys slowly drew off to the island, and here they transferred their weapons to ten of them, the very best and largest. Then fire was set to the rest, and as the light began to blaze across the water, they saw Ossery marching to engage the pirates, who as eagerly rushed to meet them. And as the galleys headed to the south, skillfully sailed by gallant Moran, the two armies engaged with the ferocity of tigers.

"Let them fight, and may the men of Munster sweep the mad red-beard from the earth," said Moran. "By the help of the God we worship, we have escaped the toils."

CHAPTER XX.

MICHAEL THE JESTER—AODH AND THE KING.

THE courier who came riding into Emana brought strange news, yet pleasing to the ear of King Redmond.

This man, after warning the Munster Prince of the coming of the men of Moran's band, had ridden away, to warn Branner of the place where Moran's galleys lay, and how he might secure them.

All had done their work well, and had not Branner, pursued to the coast by the pirates, entered into a compact with them to destroy the hated Moran, doubtless they would have fallen into the gripe of Munster. As it was the rider had seen them seize the galleys of the Formorians and sail away, leaving Munster and Tostig engaged in deadly battle. How that resulted Murtagh knew little and cared less, and at once turned his horse's head to the south, and told the king the news.

"Their God or the devil is on their side, else they could not so often escape the toils. There, man, there; the news you bring doth not please me, but there is gold for thee. Ha, Fiachra, what now, that you force your way into our presence without warning?"

"I have good reason, oh king," replied Fiachra. "And I ask not as a favor, but as a right, permission to go to Lena, for my friends are in danger."

"What friends?" demanded the king.

"Ay, my lord of Lena, what friends?" cried a shrill voice. "By our sovereign majesty, these little boys greatly trouble the kingdom."

"How now, Michael Magone," demanded the king; "there hast thou been, knave?"

It was the Jester of the dead king, Connor.

"On my travels, worthy brother, on my travels," replied the Jester. "Said I to myself, sure one fool can do a great deal of mischief in a kingdom, but when it comes to two—by the big thumb of mighty Ith, the kingdom is in danger."

The Jester had come suddenly into the room, and at once perched himself upon one arm of the king's great chair. In many ways Michael Magone was a peculiar-looking man. He was very thin and slight in figure, with long flowing flaxen hair, and twinkling blue eyes.

"Give me my cap, thou knave," he said, angrily, to an attendant. "Hast kept it safe in my absence? If not, by the beard of Cathullin, I will make thee wish another than I were king in Ulster."

His cap was produced by an eager servitor, for, odd as it may seem, there were few lords in Ireland who had more power than Michael. He took the coxcomb, as the cap was called, in his hand, and looked from side to side.

"Hither, my lord of Lena, hither," he said. "This coxcomb, the badge of my office, I give to you."

"Why so, fool?" cried Fiachra, pettishly. "Why should you do this?"

"Because the greatest fool ought to hold the office, and thou art the greatest fool in Ulster."

Fiachra's first idea was to be angry, but upon second thought he laughed.

"Prove thy proposition, Michael. Why am I the greatest fool in Ulster?"

"Because you demand permission to go to Lena to bring aid to Prince Eogan, when Prince Eogan is on the sea, and hath no need of thy help."

"On the sea!" exclaimed Fiachra; "what do you mean, Michael?"

"It was the prettiest picture, by my faith. Here slips me in that prince of good fellows, Left-handed Branner, and steals me all those galleys of Connoc Moran as easy as a finger might be bent. Then good my lord Eogan and Connoc come, and the fox slips out to sea, when down comes the wolf Tostig with his pirate galleys, and drives the fox in on the coast. Then up gets our brave Branner, and makes his bargain with Tostig, and they land to make mince-meat of Connoc Moran and the rest, and may the shadows never fall over Lough Foyle if Connoc and the rest did not there so beat them, that of three thousand men who landed, scarce fifteen hundred stood on their feet when the knights, tiring of a battle where only hard blows could be got, slipped by deftly, took the galleys of Tostig—and whoop! away they went. Then, pat as my hand, locking the door upon a stolen horse, in comes the King of North Munster to fight with Connoc Moran, and not finding him, Tostig and himself joined battle. And Tostig whipped the King of North Munster to that extent that in Munster there will be a new king this day week. And see you, my king; not only this, but that sly fox Branner, seeing that the fight was going against Tostig, slipped away with Moran's galleys, and was far away when Connoc Moran put to sea."

"How know you all this, Michael?" asked the king, in surprise.

"Faith, you may ask it. Know that I am a bird of passage, and brought my news through the surrounding air. Therefore, since this is true, Lord of Lena, you must take my coxcomb."

Fiachra laughed gayly:

"No, no, good Michael, keep the bauble, and remember that I am your friend for this good news. King Redmond, I take my leave."

"Stay," said the king, knitting his dark brows. "You asked for leave to go to Lena, and you not?"

"I did, King Redmond."

"You have my leave, Fiachra; more than that, you have my order. Go, and come not back to court until you are called."

Fiachra turned upon his heel and left the king, and was quickly at the head of his retainers and marching for Lena. On the whole he was rather pleased than otherwise at the decision of the king, and more than delighted to know that the Prince had baffled the plans of King Redmond.

"There goes one hot-head," muttered the Jester, as he saw Fiachra disappear. "Cool heads are better in these times, although hot ones are good in battle. I vow, brother Redmond, we kings have much trouble with our subjects. And where is this rebellious daughter of ours, Princess Mari? By our lady, king, if you will let me speak with her, I will wager that in five minutes thereafter she will be more complaisant to your will."

"If you could do that, Sir Fool—"

"I can do it, if you will only let me see her," was the confident reply.

"Perhaps 'twill cheer her to see thy merry face," said the king. "Take my signet and go to her at once."

The man took the signet and went away. He was gone but a few moments, when he returned and announced that the Princess desired to see her father. Redmond, who in reality loved his daughter dearly and would be glad of a reconciliation, at once obeyed. He found his daughter ready to receive him, and her sweet eyes were full of tears as she came to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Let us be friends while we can, my father," she said. "The time may not be far away when you may need my love."

"I am happier than I was," said the king. "Of all I have loved and hated, there is not one to whom I would bend sooner than to you, my peerless Mari. There; you are free to come and go as you will, and I will send away the guard from your door and bid your maidens come back to you."

Eva, who was in the room, folded her white hands over one another and smiled. She had something to tell the king which might change his mind, but she said not a word, and drew back out of hearing while the king and his daughter talked together. Then the king went away, and scarcely had he left the room when Eva also rose and passed out into the corridor, where she met the Jester face to face.

"My lady," he said, humbly, "may your slave ask where you are going?"

"Stand aside, fool," she answered, angrily.

"Why do you bar my way?"

"Because it is not my wish that you should go to the king just now. I am a poor fool, but you must hear me."

"And why, fool?"

"Because," replied the Fool, in a low, warning whisper, "I know who are the last of the race of the Belgic kings, and what they seek in Ulster."

Eva Le Fay started back, and a savage flash came into her eyes.

"Dog!" was all she said, but it had a world of meaning.

"I will not see wrong done to the Princess Mari," declared the Jester. "Work out your plans in your own way, but when they touch her, even a poor fool may find a way to baffle you."

"What! Such a slave as you dare set yourself against me?" she hissed.

"It seems so. I tell you, Eva Le Fay, that all men are not what they seem. That which is written is written; I am fatalist enough to believe that. You may conspire with Aodh the Druid to your heart's content, but beware that you do no harm to Princess Mari; she is far above you."

There was something in the attitude of the Jester as he stood with his slight form drawn up, and his thin white hand extended, which struck an awe into the heart of this strange girl.

"If I work no harm to Princess Mari you will not interfere with me?"

"No. But for King Connor's sake I love the Princess, who is of his blood."

"Then it is a bargain. But do you know, my good Michael, that you may make enemies if you cross the path of the Druids?"

"Do I fear the Druids?" answered the Jester, coldly. "Go your way, and when you whisper to the king, beware that you whisper nothing against Mari. Even the thoughts of the heart are known, and if evil comes to her I shall know from whence it comes."

He stepped back and left her a free passage. For a moment she hesitated, but seemed to have lost all desire to follow the king, and the Jester, watching her attentively from the angle of the corridor into which he had drawn back, saw her turn away and pass down a narrow hall which led to the lower part of the castle.

"She goes to Aodh to tell him what I have said," he murmured. "Be it so: it is nearly time that Aodh should know that the King's Jester hath some power."

Eva was indeed seeking the chief Druid, who sat in a stone cell, which might almost have been called a dungeon, with his stern face set, and a

wild light in his savage eyes. The man was half mad. The blow which had been struck the Druid cause by the Knights of the Cross had been a terrible one, for it had taught the people that Bel was not strong enough to protect his own. Eva closed the door behind her, glided to his side, and gave him her hand.

"Give me comfort, Le Fay," he said, passing his arm about her slender waist. "I need it very much."

As she pressed her lips to those of the Druid the heavy door swung back, and the king stood upon the threshold. Behind him appeared the grinning face of the Jester.

CHAPTER XXI.

BRANNER'S DEMAND—EVA DISAPPEARS.

"PRIEST of Bel," hissed the king, "what does this mean?"

Aodh allowed his arm to drop to his side, and Eva sprung away with a low cry, and with a demoniac look at the Jester.

"Ha, brother," cried Michael. "Even the Druids have good taste, it seems. But doth it not look like fishing upon forbidden rivers, poaching upon the king's domain, as it were?"

"To your apartment, Le Fay!" hissed the king. "Thou false hearted woman, away, or I will do a deed which would make Emana tremble. Priest, let me see you lay a finger upon her again, and not even thine office shall protect thee."

"Go, Eva," said the Druid. "Trust me to make this right."

As Eva passed the Jester her hand stole into the folds of her robe. Whirling quickly in her tracks, a poniard flashed, and she struck hard and sure between the shoulders of the strange man. The bright blade rattled, a loud snap was heard, and she stood with only the jeweled hilt in her hand.

"Well struck, daughter of the Belgic," he said, quietly. "But thy weak hand shall never have power to take my life. Do not harm her, good brother; women have the right to anger, when caught in their own net."

"I will have your life," she hissed. "Do you hear? I will murder you for this vile act. You will not always wear hidden armor."

"Thanks for the warning. Well did thy race put the mountain cat upon their shields, Eva Le Fay. Go quickly, for there is more than anger in the eyes of the king."

"Go you also," replied Aodh, quietly. "I can prove to the king that I have done no wrong."

"Did I accuse thee, Aodh? I only said the Druids had good taste," responded the Jester.

"Enough, fool; go thy ways, and remember that the arm of Bel reaches far."

"Not far enough to catch Eogan and Moran, if I remember aright," was the impudent reply.

Aodh started up furiously, but a sign from the king restrained him.

"Remember that his office gives him liberty, Druid."

"Not to blaspheme the name of the holy Bel," replied Aodh.

"He shall be more guarded. And now, Aodh, how wilt thou account for what I have seen?"

"In this way: Eva Le Fay is the daughter of my brother, as Branner is his son. Their race is higher than you think, for though Branner has served you well as your henchman, he is of the blood of the royal Belgic race, and is worthy of greater honor than he hath ever gained."

"Do you swear this, Druid?"

"By holy Bel; by the sun, moon and stars."

"Enough, I believe you. But bear in mind that I love Eva Le Fay, and that none, not even those who claim kindred, must touch her lips in my presence. Go, good Michael; I have something to say to the Druid which is not for you to hear."

Michael made a fantastic grimace and left the room.

"A trusting man is our good king," he muttered. "I must be on my guard, for if the arm of Bel is not long, that of Aodh reaches far. If I could see Clovis now all would be well, for I would set him on the track of Eogan. The Druid hath drawn my sting by acknowledging that Eva is of Belgic blood."

He loitered about in the corridor until the king came out.

"You have made enemies, good friend Michael," he said. "I do not expect to see thee alive when ten days have gone by."

"Therefore, good my king, send me away. I can do as good work afar off as here, where I shall be in hourly dread of poison and steel. Let me go and find where Prince Eogan hides his head."

"Canst do it?" demanded the king, eagerly.

"Bah, brother king. Did your courier bring you as perfect news as mine?"

"I own that he did not. Go, then; here is money, and take one of my horses. Do not come back until I hear from you in such a way that I know where Eogan is."

"And if I get that news, will you protect me from Aodh and Eva Le Fay?"

"Ay."

"Then I am gone."

He took the purse from the hand of the king

and darted away, and many days passed before he was again seen in Emana. In the mean time the king began to make himself popular. Royal jousts were held every week, and the Knights of the Craobh Ruadh became more and more perfect in the use of arms. Branner had returned, and was more in favor with the king, who had raised him to a lordship and had given him the lands of a chief who had fled with Eogan. In these jousts he had gained great honor, and no one, not even the king, could hold a lance against him. More than this, Branner began to make a strong party, until before three months had passed there was no one who held such power as he. With Branner as his right arm, and Eva Le Fay ever at his side, no wonder that the king began to grow haughty.

Long months passed, and nothing had been heard from Eogan. All knew that he was now of full age, and many in the land looked to see him come to claim his own, but as yet he made no sign.

"By my faith, Branner," cried the king one day, "who will rid me of this living fear? Who will tell me that Eogan is dead?"

"What reward shall he have who brings this news, oh king?" demanded Branner.

"He has only to ask and he shall receive," replied the king.

"His reward shall be ample, for this is the claim of the man who shall bring you the head of Eogan—the hand of the Princess Mari in marriage and the title of *Righ Damhua* to the king."

"Eogan claimed that, and I would not have it so," replied Redmond.

"But look you, King of Ulster. You know full well that Mari cannot sit upon the throne, and that only a perfect man can fill the place. I am satisfied with my power now, and if you will give the Princess to me, I swear to uphold you with all the might of my arm. Or, if you will make Eva your wife, so that her issue shall rule in Ulster, and give me the Princess, I will not only be your vassal, but will take no rest until Eogan is in his grave."

"Your hand upon that bargain," cried the king. "In ten days Eva shall be queen of Ulster; in thirty Mari shall be yours. I swear it, by this hand."

A look of wild joy came into the face of Branner.

"Had I known, long ago, that you were of royal blood, Branner, your power should have been greater. A descendant of the Belgic kings is high enough even to wed with my child. Do your work, show me the head and hand of Eogan, and we will rule in Ulster without fear."

"Right, right!" cried a shrill voice. "Here I come, brother king."

Michael Magone, with his accustomed freedom of action, had broken in on their discourse and took his station at the king's right hand. Branner turned upon him furiously, and would have struck him, but the king staid his hand.

"Do not strike him, Branner. Remember who and what he is."

"I know well that the dog interfered between you and my sister. Beware what you do, fellow; in ten days she will be Queen of Ulster, and then look to yourself."

"I am sadly interrupted, brother king," said the jester, coolly. "I had thought, when I brought you news of Eogan, that I would be better received."

"If you have done that," declared Branner, eagerly, "all shall be forgiven, and I will even speak in your behalf to my sister."

"I have found him, king. Ten days ago, with a strong army of warriors, at least two Catha,* he passed into the mountain home of Connoc Moran."

"Hail! He hath an army, then?"

"Yes, hath he. Two of the sons of Fingal of Alba marched under the Ospray, with a host of brave men behind them. By our lady, king, it would be well to look to it in time, or I may lack a master."

"Soho, Michael! Did you see this with your own eyes?"

"With these two rolling orbs which so adorn this warlike head of mine, I saw them, noble king. There was Fingal's son Cathullin, he of the crooked teeth, a stark warrior and a brave one; Rhissa the Sorcerer, with his two-handed blade; Connoc Moran and five hundred Red Cross Knights beside; the Briton Parasetus with at least half a cath of followers, but not a single Dane. Was it you, my brave Branner, who was about to set out to bring in Eogan's head?"

"I shall do it," replied Branner.

"Take a few catha from the Craobh Ruadh, for on the faith of my knightship you shall need them. I would not give the alarm without a cause, but in good sooth, I am strangely troubled in mind for thy future, worthy Branner. For, as I came from the sea of Moyle, I met a wandering knight, who did speak of thee. He said that Connoc Moran, Eogan and Ronald of the Scar upon the one hand, and King Tostig and his followers upon the other, have sworn to have thy head. For, as you know, the man-

*Six thousand men.

ner in which you took yourself away was somewhat hasty."

"Whether they get my head or I theirs, time must show. You say that they were already on the borders of the mountain home of Moran?"

"Ay."

"Then hear me, King Redmond. You know well that never in all the time since the order had a name, have the Red Branch been so strong as they are now. If Eogan hath returned to Ulster, it is to claim his own with fire and sword, and you know well that if he once appears within our borders a bloody war must follow. Then let me call out the Red Branch and march into the mountain land. Trust me, I will give so good an account of them that neither Connoc Moran or Eogan shall trouble you again."

"Have you faith that the Craobh Ruadh will be true?"

"Ay. They no longer think of Eogan or Moran, and most of them believe that they are dead. Again, many of them seek for war, because they live by war, not that they care with whom they fight. Again I say, let me make it a war of the Druids against the Christians. We shall win, and your reign will be stronger if on the Druid altars rise again the odor of the blood sacrifice."

"It may well be. I will take counsel with my wise men, and if they speak for war, war it shall be."

"I will begin my work at once. I am to be general of the army?"

"Yes, but remember that Cairnie is a good knight, and will not easily give up command of the Craobh Ruadh."

There was a grim smile upon the face of the former henchman as he heard this. He had long desired the post of commander of the Red Branch, but Cairnie was in his way. That night, strange to say, the redoubted commander of the Craobh Ruadh disappeared. For days they searched for him, but he could not be found. That he had foul play there was little doubt, but there was no proof, and no man ever saw his living form again.

The preparations went on, although no one knew against whom the war was levied. It was enough for the younger Red Branch warriors that they should fight with naked steel, and have a chance for golden spurs.

"Send out a messenger to Fiachra," said Branner. "He is slow in bringing in his levies."

The messenger from Lena came in two days later. Fiachra refused to move until he knew with whom he was to fight.

"Fiachra's head sits not very tightly on his shoulders," answered the king to the messenger. "Tell him from me that if, in five days' time, he is not here with full one thousand men, I will come and fetch him, with all the Red Branch at my back."

Cormac the Wise, who heard this order, hurried from the hall in dread, where he was met by the Jester, who was even in favor with Eva since he had brought news of the coming of Eogan. The strange fellow had managed to make his peace with her, and no longer jested against Branner or his sister.

"Cormac," he said in a low whisper, "never say that you are wise, and I a fool; but he who would escape danger leaves a house when the tiles begin to fall about his ears."

Cormac made no reply, but looked at the speaker closely. That very night the old councilor disappeared, and men said he had fled to Cavan. But others whispered among themselves that Cormac had been sent to join Cairnie, and that Left-handed Branner knew where they were hidden.

The morrow was set down for the bridal of the king and Eva Le Fay. That night the would-be queen disappeared from her apartment. She had slept part of the night, for her couch was in disorder, but she had disappeared completely, and no one knew how or why.

CHAPTER XXII.

MICHAEL'S ACCUSATION—AODH JUSTIFIES EVA LE FAY.

THE utter confusion, doubt and terror in Emana is impossible to describe.

Soon it began to extend throughout Ulster, and wild rumors were afloat. The king sent out his messengers far and near, and said that the man who brought him news of Eva should be Lord of Lena in the place of Fiachra, who had not come at the appointed time, and had been declared outlaw. In the midst of all this confusion the Jester went about with a smooth visage, undisturbed by any doubts or fears.

"I could tell you somewhat, gossip of mine," he said to the king. "Wilt make me Lord of Lena if I give you news of this fair lady?"

"To you, or any man."

"Faith, I have a mind to test you. But no; I should make a poor lord at best, for a good lord must be a right royal fool. Then, if I tell the truth, you will be so angry that you will cut off my head, perhaps."

"No; better the truth than suspense."

"Eva Le Fay is with Fiachra, wherever he may be. Thou didst not know, perhaps, that before he loved the Lady Medora, he passed

away many a pleasant hour with Eva Le Fay. And now she is away to her former lover, Fiachra, Lord of Lena."

"Fool," hissed King Redmond, catching him by the throat, "you have lied to me; you have lied!"

"This is the gratitude of kings," whined the Jester, as soon as he could recover his breath. "I tell him that which should make his heart leap for joy, and like to the animal I have heard of, he rends me limb from limb. Hark ye, brother; it is not good for you to be at large; you are crazy. Do you want a queen who would get her up and bide away at the first lure of the hunter? Fie, brother, fie."

The king dropped his hand. "In good sooth, my poor Michael, that which you say is right. If Eva Le Fay hath indeed fled with Fiachra, I will tear her out of my heart forever."

"I said not she had fled with Fiachra, but to him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Fiachra does not care for her, and to do him justice, hath done nothing to lure her away. His love is for the Lady Medora, and he would not be false to her. But strangely enough, Le Fay prefers his love rather than to be crowned Queen of Ulster. It is bad taste, but so it is."

"To your proof, Michael, your proofs. And remember, if you have wronged her, your life will not be enough to pay the penalty; you shall die by inches."

"Am I judge of her actions? I only know that she came to me and asked about the route to Lena, and I told her, not thinking wrong. In the corridor before her door I found this."

He held out a small piece of parchment, and the king snatched it eagerly.

"Fiachra, to the fairest Lady Eva Le Fay—Greetings!"

"For the love which I once bore you, and because I think you will not be safe there when the mad passions of the felon king are aroused, I will give you the shelter you ask. Meet fifty of my knights by the river Car, where the bridge crosses on the path to Killmainham, on the second night."

"Send hither Branner," screamed the king.

"Life of my body, let me see the face of this traitor. Ho, Captain of the Guard; to me, Cead Tonan!"

An officer came in hastily, but not forgetting his customary reverence.

"Bring Branner, Lord of Cavan," the king cried. "Drag him hither, if he refuses to come."

"There is no need, oh king," said the officer. "He is at the door and craves admittance."

"In with him."

Branner came in with a lofty step, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his blazing eyes fixed upon the king. He was in full armor, and at a glance the king saw that he was on his guard.

"You have sent for me, but I was here before your messenger, my king. There is a rumor in the street—"

"Thou foul traitor," screamed King Redmond. "How wilt thou save thy head?"

"I a traitor, King Redmond! Never before was that stain laid upon Branner. I have served you as man never served his king; I have shed my blood for thee; at your order I have done deeds which look awful to me now, as I know the gratitude of the man whom I, and I alone, placed upon the throne."

"Wilt thou dare say that this flight was all unknown to thee?"

"Ay; I will say it and swear it. More than this, I will kill that treacherous and base-hearted sister of mine with my own hand when we meet."

"Would you do that?"

"I will, for she hath destroyed the hope of years. I have planned to place her on the throne, partly for my own sake, but more for hers, in that I loved her well. She, the darling of my father, the pride of my mother, the woman who, of all others, I took delight in, and who would now be a queen but for her own act, shall feel my vengeance yet."

The officer of the guard again appeared, and announced Aodh the Druid, who came in slowly, with his usual cold, haughty look.

"Send out yonder fool," said the Druid. "I have something of moment to say to you, oh king."

Michael strutted up to the Druid with his arms akimbo.

"Soul of my body, man," he cried, "do you know that you address the Lord of Lena as a fool?"

"Go out, Michael, go out," was the order of the king. "I am not in the mood for jesting now."

Michael left the room with a comical glance at Aodh, but the moment he was out of the room he disappeared with wonderful celerity.

"This Druid means mischief," he muttered. "Well, well; we shall see what we shall see. I am a poor fool, but I have a head upon my shoulders still."

He dived into one of the darkest passages of the castle, and was gone.

"Now that yonder fool is out of the way I can speak with safety," declared Aodh. "Art sure no one is listening, King Redmond?"

"Come into my cabinet. Shall Branner stay also?"

"I desire it."

The king preceded them into his cabinet, bolted the door, and turned to the Druid.

"Let us waste no time," he said. "My rage is consuming me; I shall know no peace until Fiachra and his paramour are dead."

"Speak not too hastily, king. Slay Fiachra when you will, for he is a traitor, and deserves to die; but remember that Eva Le Fay is a noble lady, who is to be your queen."

"My queen! Never."

"And why not?" demanded Aodh.

"Because she is false to me; because she hath fled to the villain Fiachra, once Lord of Lena."

"You were ever ready to believe anything without proof, King Redmond. I say that in all the land there is none so true to you as Eva, and that even now her life is in peril for thy sake."

"By holy Bel. You tire my patience, Druid. Here, in the hand of Fiachra, is the proof that she hath fled to him."

The Druid took the letter and cast his eyes over it.

"I do not blame you for thinking as you do, since you have seen this. Who gave you this letter?"

"Michael, my Jester."

"Where did he get it?"

"He found it upon the floor in the corridor, near the apartments of Eva."

"He hath lied. That paper was stolen from me last night, for Eva gave it me," declared the Druid.

"Then you knew of her flight," hissed the king, starting to his feet in a fury.

"Do not let your passion run away with you again, King Redmond. It is by my advice that Eva Le Fay hath done as she has done. Think a moment; Fiachra goes to join Prince Ith Eogan; Eva will be with him; and the secret plans of these conspirators will soon be in her hands. Knowing their plans, how easy will it be to baffle them."

"Why did I not know this?" demanded Branner, angry at being left in the dark.

"That was left with me, and I was about to disclose it when I heard that the king, in his mad fury, was doing the work of our hands. See you not that his wild proclamations will convince the conspirators that Eva Le Fay has in good faith fled from the king? And perhaps, in the mercy of Bel, some chance may be given to use the poisons which no one understands better than she, and our enemies may be quietly moved out of our path. Now what say you, King Redmond?"

"I only say that she is the most noble woman the world holds. Shall I withdraw my proclamations?"

"No, no; make them stronger, if you will. Send an army into Lena as if in quest of her, and burn and pillage on all sides. Make them believe that you are hot in your anger against her, and that will be enough."

"You are right. And now, what shall be done with Michael?"

"Let him alone. I suspect him grievously, and believe that he is more knave than fool, but it would be destruction to our plans to do anything against him now. Go to your work, Branner; make your army as strong as possible, for, believe me, when the struggle comes, the battle will be a hard one. There are many lukewarm friends of our cause, and many more who will be open enemies in that day. It was a sad thing that you did not treat Fiachra better, for he has a large following in Ulster."

"It might be repaired yet."

"No, the time has gone by. All the friends of Lena will be ranked under the banner of the Ospry, and the fault is our own. But let that pass; we are strong enough to win yet."

Aodh and Branner left the cabinet together, after a long conference. The king soon followed, but scarcely had he left the room when the heavy drapery at the end of the room was pushed aside, and a light masked figure sprang in. The signet of the king lay upon the table, and hastily seizing it, he hurried back behind the drapery, just as the king re-entered hastily. The curtain was still shaking as he passed into the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OUTLAWS' REFUGE—THE COMING OF EVA. ALL was joy in the mountain home of Connec Moran, for the lord of the land had come back to his own.

He came in royal state, with many a broad banner at his back, and the cross of his faith floating in the van. There was seen the Ospry, the banner of the house of Emana; the black banner of Parasetus, king of North Britain; the standard of the Lord of Man; the sun banner of the Alban king, borne by his two bravest sons, and many more besides. The force of Eogan had greatly increased, for, if Redmond did not know where to find him, his friends did, and one by one they had joined him in the island home which had been given him by gallant Fingal.

The people of Moran had often heard from their lord, and now they gladly welcomed him to

his home. He had come upon a holy mission, to beat down forever the pride of the Druids in Ulster, and set up the Christian cross.

The castle of the famed knight of Moran was well formed to hurl back the attacks of his many enemies.

It stood upon a lofty height which commanded all the surrounding plain, a great valley, hemmed in on every side by rugged mountains. The valley could only be entered by three passes, and there had been rendered almost unassailable by the skillful engineers of the Christian knight. It was no wonder, that, an outlaw under the ban of two kingdoms, Moran had so long been able to resist attack, and make good his mountain realm. The castle itself was a mighty edifice, with huge stone walls and towers, built as men build in the olden time. It was always provisioned for a siege, for when the tide of war came against it the people of the smaller villages, outside the mountains retired with all their most valuable goods, their cattle and sheep, into the valley, and with weapons in their hands, made good its defense. Ten times in as many years had they beaten back great armies sent against them, until the knights and archers of Moran were known far and wide, and the kings no longer sought to attack Moran in his mountain home.

A gallant company of noble gentlemen walked the battlement of the castle. Moran, Eogan, the two sons of Fingal—Cathullin and Rhissa—Parasetus, and the Lord of Man. All were in their native costumes, but the Irish lords surpassed their allies in their rich attire, and heavy golden ornaments. The year had little changed either Eogan or Moran. Perhaps the face of the young Prince had a greater look of confidence, for he had seen many battles since he left his native land, and had proved the power of his arm upon the Danes and Norsemen who had attacked Alba while he was on her shores. In ten battles which he had fought he had taught these fierce invaders that, though exiled, he was worthy to be a king.

"A herald, a herald!" cried a voice in the court below.

A man was seen spurring across the plain, and Eogan, who was well versed in the heraldry of Ulster, announced, as he came nearer, that he was of the house of Lena.

"Let us descend," said Eogan, eagerly. "If we can win Fiachra to our side, it will be a mighty blow to the power of Redmond."

They reached the court just as the herald rode in and blew a blast upon his trumpet.

"Where is the Prince Ith Eogan?" he cried.

"I, Dhal Cassan, herald in chief to the magnificent Fiachra, Lord of Lena, bear him a message."

"Speak without fear, Dhal Cassan," replied Eogan. "I am glad to hear a message from your noble master."

"Noble Prince, in his name I greet thee well, and say:

"Redmond hath done me wrong. Urged on by Branner, now Lord of Cavan, since the noble Cormac hath been made away with, he had heaped insults upon my haughty house. Lena no longer holds by him, and is ready to assert, with all the might in her arms, that only Ith Eogan is worthy to be king of Ulster."

"Well and boldly hath thy mission been done, herald," answered Eogan. "Say to thy brave master that the time is at hand, and Ith Eogan will boldly claim his own, wrested from him by the strong hand of Redmond of Clare. Where is thy master?"

"He is camped near the mountains, waiting for your answer."

"Let me speak for the people of Moran," cried Connec. "Say that our fortifications are not strong enough to fence out noble friends. He shall be welcome, with all his men, and we will go out to meet him. Away, herald, and take thy guerdon with thee."

Every lord in the assembly gave him a rich present, and he rode away, more than satisfied with the result of his mission.

"To horse, gallant gentlemen," exclaimed Moran. "Let us meet this noble friend upon the way. A hundred knights for escort. Ronald, be in haste."

A gallant company thundered over the drawbridge and headed for the nearest pass into the valley. As they entered it all saw that the place was impregnable, for both sides of the pass were lined with fortifications, from which ruin could be poured upon the heads of an enemy. Scarcely were they clear of the pass, when, half a mile away, they saw the forces of Fiachra in motion. Not alone was this force composed of the men of Lena, for, of the five hundred horsemen, who, clad in complete mail, rode in the van, at least two hundred wore the sign of the Red Branch. They were gallant gentlemen, who saw in Eogan all the hope of Ulster, and had been easily persuaded to join his banner. Behind them came fifteen hundred men variously armed, but not a man among them who was not fitted to bear the brunt of a mighty battle.

Most of them were armed in mail shirts, and even the common soldiery had breastplates and iron caps. Altogether, it was a gallant force,

and the heart of Eogan beat high at the prospect of this great addition to his army. He spurred on to meet Fiachra, and the two embraced in the sight of both armies, while resounding cheers were heard from both sides.

"Welcome to me, Fiachra," said Eogan. "Leaning on thy strong shoulder, how can I fall?"

"Lean on the sword of your fathers, my brave Prince," replied Fiachra. "But see who comes with me. Greet the lady Eva Le Fay, the sister of Branner."

Eogan started, and saw, riding a richly caparisoned palfrey, the slight figure of Eva Le Fay.

"What means this, Fiachra? Surely your heart has not turned away from Lady Medora?"

"Nay, nay, Prince. My heart is all given to Lady Medora, but this fair lady fled from Emana to me, and I gave her shelter. What think you? She would have been Queen of Ulster now if she had remained."

"It is passing strange that she should fly, then. I have heard that she was ambitious, and I cannot understand why she should not wed King Redmond. He is a gallant warrior, and well fitted to win lady's heart."

"She did consent, but feeling an unutterable horror, as the time drew nigh, she fled to me. I gave her my protection, and promised her yours."

"She shall have it, for when Fiachra pledges his faith for Eogan his word must be made good," declared the Prince.

He rode forward and greeted Eva in courtly style, and she answered in the soft low voice which had won the heart of Redmond. Eogan felt the charm of her presence, and believed that she had in good faith fled from the king; but Moran, tough old soldier, looked at her with an ill grace.

"She has devil blood in her veins, and I do not like her," he thought, "but surely this slight woman can do no harm. Let her stay; let her stay."

The gallant army passed on into the valley, and their tents were pitched upon the level ground outside the castle walls, while the captains and other leaders, upon Moran's invitation, went into the castle. Connec took Eva by the hand and led her to the chamber of his lady, a courtly dame, who received her with as good grace as possible, for, like her husband, she did not trust the serpent blood of the Belgæ. She knew well, that, though beaten and trampled under foot by the sons of Ith, they nursed in their hearts a savage resentment against their conquerors. As the years went on, and they saw little hope of regaining their lost ascendancy, and as, year by year, their race grew less, their anger against the sons of Ith seemed to increase. At this time scarcely five hundred men in Ulster could claim to be of Belgæ blood, and of the royal race only Branner, Eva, and Aodh remained. The old families, like that of Connec Moran, who had known all the royal houses and kept their traditions through many generations, knew that there was a Belgæ prophecy that by a woman the royal race of Belgæ should again become great. Still, there was something so sweet and winning in the manner of the girl that even this acute lady felt her influence.

"Thou hast great power over the children of men," said Lady Moran. "See that thou use it not for evil, child."

"Do you think me evil, dear lady?" she asked.

"What a strange question, child? I could not answer it, even if I would. But thou art welcome; thou art welcome. Only remember, Lady Eva, that we who give thee shelter are under ban because we worship the one true God; and if, after we have taken thee in, any wrong is done us by thy means, you fight against him."

The girl made no reply except a pretty, reproachful look, and then cast down her eyes. But her heart was full of bitterness, for she knew that they did not fully trust her.

"I must be on my guard before this woman and her husband," she thought. "Woe to them in the day when I take my vengeance."

Her eyes were everywhere throughout the day, although she did not seem to look up. To her utter surprise she found that Eogan had collected an army of twenty thousand men, a mighty force for that country. Not only that, but they were all seasoned warriors; there was not a weakling among them.

"It will be a hard battle," she thought. "Munster must come to our aid, or we are beaten. Ay, and Connaught as well."

An apartment was assigned her that night, and a guard placed over the door. But she noticed that two doors came into the room, although they were closely bolted upon the inside. Scarcely was her door closed when she heard a low, peculiar signal tap at one of these doors, and drawing back a bolt admitted a man in a mask, who made her a sign which she knew.

"Come not too near," she said, in a hissing whisper. "I have a poniard, and the point is poisoned. A touch, and you are a dead man. What do you seek?"

"I am sent by Aodh. Even here, in the heart of Moran's castle, the Druids have a friend. You will report to me each night, and I will take such measures that a courier shall each day carry to Emana what you have to say."

"Tell them that I am safe and unsuspected," she said. "Tell them that Eogan hath seven catha of troops, and that they are gallant warriors. Name the leaders of the force, and say that there are not men enough in all Ireland to defeat them here, and that, unless Munster comes to the aid of King Redmond, he can hardly win. That is all to-night; now go."

The man stepped back through the open door, which Eva bolted, and then she lay down and slept as calmly as if no thought of evil were in her mind.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE POISONED GOBLET—THE DOOM OF THE TRAITOR.

THE great banquet table was spread in Moran Castle, and around the board a royal party was assembled. In the place of honor sat Eogan, much against his will, but Moran would have it so. On his right hand sat Moran and on his left his wife. Next to her was Eva, and many a knight, raising his eyes to her from the long table, thought that for her sake he would do noble deeds.

"If my good brother were but here with the *Oraobh Ruadh* at his back, how quickly he could end this war," she thought. "How I hate Eogan; but for him I need not risk life and liberty here, but should be queening it right royally in the palace at Emana. Would that the wine they drink were of my seasoning. I have half a mind even now, to try my hand upon this flagon."

Her eyes were fixed upon a golden cup which stood near her, and from which Eogan must drink, if he drank at all. Her hand sought a tiny bottle which had been given her by Aodh, and she was tempted to try it, but there were too many eyes upon her. She would wait a better time. As she rose to leave the table that time came, and unseen by any one, she dropped into the cup a portion of the contents of the vial.

"If he drink it, well; if not, it is only an opportunity lost. No one will suspect me," was her thought.

"Let the wine pass freely," cried Moran. "Drink to the success of our cause; drink from the cup of him who is to be our king."

He caught up the flagon which stood at the right hand of Eogan and was about to raise it to his lips, when he stopped and looked at it in wonder. A peculiar odor had attracted his attention, an odor foreign to the rich wine, whose bouquet he knew so well.

"A moment, noble gentlemen," he said. "Send my leech here."

The shambling figure of the old man who had performed the operation which saved Moran's life quickly appeared.

"I suspect that wine," declared Moran. "Test it, doctor."

The man of medicine raised the cup to his nostrils, and then touched it with his tongue.

"Ah!" he muttered. "Were you all about to drink from this cup?"

"Yes," responded Connoc Moran.

"It is well you called me. The wine is poisoned; a drop of this, as it is now, would kill the strongest man on earth, and even I do not know the antidote. You may be sure, worthy knight, that Aodh the Druid sends you this."

A furious cry broke from the lips of the knight, and he cast an angry glance around him. But there was no one to suspect. The men who sat near were above suspicion, and the conviction came into his mind that a secret enemy was at work in his own castle. But when the other wine along the table was tested, it was found to be all right.

"It was meant for the Prince, then," cried Moran. "Gentlemen, this foul attempt will only hurry on our great design, for we see, more than ever, that Redmond is not fit to reign. I here swear that I will drink no wine until Eogan is king of Ulster. Do ye all the same."

The vow was taken by all, perhaps the more readily that they had just escaped a fearful danger. Henceforward there was no danger from wine. The banquet broke up, and they began that very night to make their preparations for the coming war. Heralds went out in every direction, and a challenge was sent at once to King Redmond, defying him, and in set language demanding that he should give up the throne to its rightful owner, Prince Eogan.

Eva was not making great progress. Strangely enough, while she seemed to have the most perfect freedom, her every movement was watched, and she began to realize, that, while she was safe, she was not to be trusted in any way. Three days had passed, and three times she had sent a message to Emana through the secret spy who had come to her room at night. But from the first she had not been able to learn much of any moment, and began to fear that her time was wasted here, if she were not indeed in actual danger. Lady Moran still retained her cold,

polite demeanor, but her eyes never seemed to leave the motions of the girl. She could not raise a hand without being observed. Many times she had thought to use her drus upon one of the persons she so hated, but as often she was certain to find a pair of keen eyes watching her closely.

"I must away," she thought, as she retired to her apartments. "I will leave with the masked messenger this very night."

As she closed and bolted the door she heard the low tap of the traitorous spy, and hurried to the door. As she did so she started and a low cry of horror broke from her lips.

Some artisan had been at work in the room since she left it; the door was no longer there, but was completely walled up in solid stone, and strong iron bars set into the old masonry upon both sides, up and down. While she was inspecting it wildly, a tap came at the outer door, and she ran to open it. Lady Moran stood there, with a peculiar smile upon her face.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," she said, "but we had reason to believe that your room had been invaded by some person who knows the secret ways of the castle, and I had the door walled up."

"I thank you," replied Eva. "You are very careful of my safety, madam."

"I seem to hear a strange tapping on the other side of the wall," remarked the lady. "The person, who ever it is, would do well to go away at once."

The tapping ceased directly, and the two women stood looking at each other in a strange way. Just then a slight scuffling sound was heard on the other side of the wall, and then retreating footsteps.

"It is just as I said, child. The fellow, who ever he may be, has got into trouble. It was very foolish in him to come here. No doubt it is some young knight who has become enamored of your beauty and wished to see you."

"Perhaps you are right, madam. And if it is indeed so, do him no injury, for my sake," said the girl.

"I will go and attend to the matter at once. Good-by, Lady Eva; sweet sleep and pleasant dreams. No one shall disturb you if we can help it in any way."

As the door closed upon her the look of a demon came into the face of Eva Le Fay.

"Old hill cat!" she hissed. "Would I might mix the next cup of which you drink. Am I mad, or has everything turned against me, and is my purpose known?"

In the court-yard of the castle a strange scene was going on. Workmen were busy in setting up a scaffold and draping it in black. At an hour before sunrise one of the doors opened and a strong body of axmen came out, guarding a man who crouched and whimpered, begging for his life. This man, a trusted retainer of Moran, who had the post of keeper of the keys, and knew all the secrets of the castle, had been caught by the men of Connoc Moran at the secret door which led into the room of Eva Le Fay, masked closely, and evidently bent on mischief.

He had been dragged before the master of the castle, and found him in the hall of judgment, attended only by Eogan and the man known as Clovis, the huntsman.

"Malachi," said the judge, sternly. "You are in a sad strait. What were you doing in the passage which leads to the rooms of the Lady Eva?"

"No wrong, my master, no wrong," replied the wretch, cringing.

"Lying knave. Do you know that all your treachery hath been opened to me, and that I know your secret heart?"

"I have done no wrong," whined the abject wretch. "Spare me, my master; let me go free."

"Stand forward, Clovis," said Moran. "Say what thou hast to say."

"I will speak freely," responded Clovis. "A week since this man, Malachi Doran, met the Druid Belzac in the wood beyond the mountain. At that time and place he swore, for a certain sum in gold, to carry messages from the Lady Eva Le Fay to a courier always in waiting in the wood. He went to her room each night and received her message, and then, taking the secret path known only to the most trusted men of Moran, he reached the wood."

"It is false, it is false," shrieked Malachi. "I am not the traitor you would make me."

"Thou fool," replied Moran, "not a step have you taken since the first night of the coming of this she-wolf which has not been watched. Clovis, by my orders has been upon your track night and day; not a word have you spoken which has not been heard. Malachi, for this many years I have trusted you, and now, much as it grieves me that one of the men who have taken the cross should be so false of heart, it is decreed that you must die."

"I confess, I confess!" screamed the unhappy man. "Let me live, and I will do anything. I will betray King Redmond, for I know his plans."

"No, traitor; confessions are vain, for we will beat King Redmond in fair battle, and not by guile. An hour is given thee, while the

scaffold is set up, for thou art not to die by the sword. In that hour make thy peace with the God against whom thy hand was lifted, since you worked for the Druids and not for Him. Away with him, guards; and when the scaffold is ready, bear him to his doom."

For an hour the guilty wretch, writhing in agony, was kept under the care of the guard. His shrieks, groans, and imprecations were alike unheeded. The stern soldiery looked upon the pitiful wretch with scornful eyes, in which there was not one ray of pity. They knew that he was guilty, and that death was a slight punishment for his contemplated wrong. The hour passed, and still struggling and crying out for pity, he was led out to his doom, while from an upper window the stern faces of the leaders of the army were seen, looking down upon him.

"This man is unfit to live and still more unfit to die," declared Moran, "but for the safety of all his life is sped. 'Oh, see, see; gentlemen! He was my foster-brother, and the same breast gave us nourishment. And yet, in spite of all, for the gold of King Redmond, the wretch would have betrayed our holy cause.'"

"Let him die," said Eogan, sternly.

Moran waved his hand, and the next instant the wretch was dangling in the air, in the convulsions of death, and the party slowly withdrew from the casements. Justice has been done upon a mighty traitor.

Morning came, and Eva, full of strange doubt, was seated in her room, when a servant entered and announced that Connoc Moran wished to see her. She followed him without a word, and found the brave old knight waiting for her in the corridor. Without speaking he took her hand and led her to the window which looked into the court, and there, swinging by the neck, she saw the dead form of a man whom she did not know.

"Why dost thou bring me to see this horrible sight?" she gasped. "I know not the man."

"Yet this is thy work, vile traitress. To betray us and set up your own blood you came here, and this man was the masked accomplice who came to you nightly. Why should you not share his doom?"

Her only answer was to fold her arms and step back, looking him coldly and defiantly in the face. Caught in her own act, Eva Le Fay knew how to die.

CHAPTER XXV.

BRANNER'S DEMAND—THE PROMISE OF KING REDMOND.

THE defiance of the Prince had been received in Emana, and the king was preparing for the battle. In giving fair warning of his intentions, Eogan had done no more than chivalry demanded of him in those days. The challenge always preceded an insurrection, and many times, when the challenged party demanded time for preparation, it was granted him without question. But in this case, as the preparation for war had begun upon both sides at nearly the same time, neither could in justice call for more time.

On the day after the execution of Malachi Doran, just as the sun set, a horseman came riding into Emana at a furious pace. He brought a defiance from Moran, and was in fact the courier who had waited in the wood for the message of Malachi.

"Say to the king," was the message, "that the assassin's dagger and poison are not the tools with which we work. Eva Le Fay is detected, and the man who leagued with the Druids hangs by the neck in the court-yard of Castle Moran, as a warning to all traitors."

"Who gave this message?" demanded the king.

"Connoc Moran himself. As I left the wood I heard the sound of busy preparation, and I think that the enemy is on the march."

"Do you know what hath been done with Eva Le Fay?"

"No."

"Hast ye no rumors?"

"Not one."

"A herald!" cried the king; "a herald, ho!"

One of the chief heralds came at the summons, and stood ready.

"To horse, Cluan Dart, and ride for life or death to Castle Moran. Say to Eogan that if he dares lay a finger's weight upon the Lady Eva, there will not be lives enough in all his felon force to atone for the evil, for I swear that the life of no prisoner shall be spared. Say to Fiachra, that vile traitor, that Lady Medora is here, and her life shall answer for that of my queen."

The herald darted away upon his mission, and soon the thunder of his horse's hoofs was heard as he dashed out of the castle court. The plain before the castle was one vast camp, and a war-like show it was. A loud hum was heard on every side, and the gleam of steel and brass armor, the clash of swords, the rattle of horses' trappings, the shout of command, the steady tramp of marching columns, and the smoke and din which hangs about every camp, made a scene which might have delighted any heart which took pleasure in warlike sights and sounds. Left-handed Branner, as commander of the Red Branch, was everywhere, directing, guiding and ordering, and he was already popu-

lar with the Craobh Ruadh. Cairnie had been too stern with them, and Branner aimed to make himself popular by fraternizing with the knights and making them his equals.

He heard the news of the detection of his sister with coldness, as he cared but little for her for her own sake. It was for the good she could do him, for the power she had to raise him in the social scale, that he valued her. But if she had failed in the plans she had marked out without consulting him, he let her go without a murmur.

He strode into the presence of the king, clad from head to foot in mail, with golden gorget and high Roman helmet, formed of mingled steel and bronze. His visor was thrown up, and through it his tawny beard hung upon his breast. There was something noble and commanding in his face, villain though he was.

"King Redmond," he said, "I have before told you that something must be done to join the fortunes of your house and mine. While Eva was at liberty, and there was a chance of your making her your queen, I did not hurry my own marriage. But things have changed, since, by her own act, she has put herself in the hands of her enemies and yours."

"What do you wish?" demanded King Redmond.

"It is not a wish; it is a demand."

"What do you demand, then?"

"The hand of your daughter in marriage."

"But look you, Branner; is not this demand somewhat hasty?" he inquired.

"There is need of haste. You have heard Ith Eogan swear that Mari should be his wife. He comes with a mighty force, and if by any chance the Princess should fall into his hands, you know full well that we should never see her again, except as his wife."

"Ay, but will she listen to a suit so suddenly urged? Bear in mind that she has been taught to look upon you as a dependant, a servant, in fact. It will be hard for one who has been loved by a Prince of the blood to wed with one who can only, at best, claim kindred with a conquered race."

"Now by my father's head, oh king, beware that you do not urge this matter too closely. I had not hoped that she would wed me willingly but wed me she must; I swear it, by this hand."

"And if I refuse—"

"Refuse, an you will," replied the brave man, fiercely. "I warn you, if you do, that you will have many a lukewarm friend, and perhaps some open enemies, in the battles which are to come, whom you wot not of now."

"Dare you threaten, Branner?" cried the king. "Here, in my own Castle of Emana, under the royal banner, you speak of turning traitor?"

"Nay, King Redmond; I have spilled my best blood for you, lied for you, turned my back upon my friends, taken false vows and made myself a by-word and a hiss in the eyes of all men of valor. Part of this lost fame I have won back, but much remains to do. I only ask what is mine by right, and I say that I, at least, would fight more valiantly for my wife than the Princess Mari."

"I am wrong, Branner. You shall have your will, for no man deserves it better. Will you see Mari now?"

"I should wish it."

"Then come with me."

The two passed on into the castle, and in the long corridors they met Michael, who was dancing and singing.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo!" he shouted. "The king and the owl. The bridegroom and the father! Hoo, hoo, hoo!"

"I will break thy pate across, thou wretch!" cried Branner.

"Wouldst make me a Christian, that you set the mark of the cross upon me? King, my dreams are bad; let me go away from this place, for there is blood in the air."

"You are right, Michael," replied the grim king. "And who will win?"

"Let me tell you a story, master, and perhaps you will understand. Once there was a king in a far land threatened with the loss of his kingdom. He called in the fox to his aid, because the fox was crafty, old, and gray. Two other foxes joined with the old one, and said: 'We will gain the love of all the warriors of the king,' and they gained it. Then they went out and fought the battle and beat the enemy. Then steps me in my lord Fox and drives out the king, and takes the kingdom for himself."

"What is the moral of your tale, Michael?" asked the king.

"That the wise will fight their own battles and not call in the aid of those who are stronger than they, lest they take the prize for which they fought."

Branner cast a furious look at the Jester, for he understood too well that he referred to Aodh, Eva and himself. But it would not do for him to say too much, and he kept his temper. Michael now linked his arm through that of the king and walked on by his side.

"We go a-wooing, do we not?" said the Jester. "Faith, it is so long since I wooed fair lady that I would fain learn a lesson. Take a dog whip with you, my master. You will need

it, or e'er you drive the Princess to wed with Branner."

The next moment the Jester was rolling on the stone floor, felled by a terrible blow from the gauntleted hand of the knight. For a moment he lay stunned, and then, slowly rising, he walked up to Branner and looked him full in the face.

"Good blow and bravely struck, worthy Branner," he said. "By the name of honor, 'tis not often we may meet with a knight in mail who dare so gallantly strike down an unarmed man. Faith, the time will come when you may be right sorry for that blow."

"Away, you starveling," cried Branner, "or I may forget myself again. By the mercy of Bel, you may be thankful that it was not my dagger instead of my hand."

"So—you speak truly. Such a blow would have been well worthy of you, Branner. But let it pass, let it pass. I am a poor fool, and you a lord of the noble Belgic race, but fore heaven! we shall see what we shall see."

He turned and walked away rapidly, followed by a malevolent look from Branner.

"Provide yourself with a new Jester, my king," he said. "Michael will not be of service to you shortly."

"I will not have harm come to him," asserted the king.

"Faith, he knows too much, King Redmond. Many a man has played the fool in public who was over wise in private life, and such an one is Michael. I believe, on my soul, that half the trouble we have had of late, and that trouble hath not been slight, has come direct from him."

"You wrong him, you wrong him, Branner," was the answer. "He is a worthy fellow, but not over-wise, surely."

"I tell you that I need only to suspect a man, and that man is in his grave. Two lords who have stood high in rank here in Emana learned my way, and where are they now? This fool irks me; his doom is spoken."

"Let us on," replied the king, in a gloomy tone. "I was mad in the day when I refused to make Ith Eogan my Righ-Dambua. I believe, if I had done that, that there would have been peace in my kingdom this day."

"Say you so?" hissed Branner, pausing and laying his hand upon his sword. "Do you mean to play me false, King Redmond? An' if I thought that—"

"What would you do?" demanded Redmond.

"Bow like a child before you, and say: 'Oh king, thy mighty will be done.' Never, King Redmond. I might die, but I would not die alone."

"I did but jest, Branner. I know that thou hast given me worthy service, and I will keep my faith."

"My name is not Eogan, and I do not put faith in the word of a man simply because accident or good friends has made him king. I say that you must keep faith with me," repeated Branner.

"I am not one to bear threats from any man, Lord of Cavan. Beware, for those who made can unmake," declared Redmond.

"Let it be so," answered Branner, turning away with frowning brow. "I leave you, but I come again in another guise."

"Tush, man," said the king, "why so testy; have I broken faith in aught?"

"Not yet," replied Branner, a grim look on his dark face. "You can prove to me by your deeds that you mean to keep faith."

"I will do so. Take the army and march against Eogan and the traitor crew who take part with him. Give me a good account of them, and I swear that on your return my daughter shall be your wife, and I will raise you to the rank of Prince, and make you my Righ-Dambua."

That very day, with flaunting banners, in all the pride of war, ten catha of royal troops marched out in search of Eogan and Connoc Moran.

A week had passed, and the army of Branner lay encamped before the entrance to the valley where Eogan and his host lay.

He had sent out his scouts, but few of them returned. Those who did so said that there was little hope of success in assailing this strong retreat, and even Branner began to see that he had undertaken an heroic task. One traitor among the enemy could have given him much help, but that man was now no more, and his bones were bleaching in the pit into which he had been hurled after he had hung some days in view of all the army.

Branner was furious, and yet he was wise enough to see that he must work cautiously.

Again and again his outposts were assailed and driven in by the besieged, who made the nights lively for him.

Already the country was stripped of provisions, for, at his approach, every four-footed animal had been driven into the valley, out of the reach of his foragers. If he remained long before the fortified valley, his troops would suffer from hunger.

There was a Council that night in the great pavilion in front of the main camp of the king's troops, and there were assembled the chiefs of

all the army. It was night, and Branner, with a somewhat gloomy look upon his face, sat at the head of the Council. They had not yet decided upon any course of action, and most of the Council were opposed to Branner in one respect; they wished to be led instantly to the attack upon the strong position.

"You will only cast your lives away," responded Branner. "There is not one among you, no, I bar no man, who would give so much to see the proud Ospray in the dust as Branner, Lord of Cavan. But they have a noble force, and behind such walls as these about the castle of Moran, even should we win the valley, they would have every chance in their favor. Even in a pitched battle on the open plain, our chances would only be equal."

"They laugh at our peaceful counsels," declared a young knight of the Craobh Ruadh. "While we sit here they scoff at us over their wine, while we starve upon this barren mountainside."

"They do not sleep," replied Branner. "Hark! What noise is that? By holy Bel, they assail us, even in our camp, and yet ye think to take them by surprise!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NIGHT ATTACK—THE BATTLE IN THE PASS.

THE Council broke up in confusion, and every leader sprung to arms.

There was need enough, for the men of Moran had turned the tables upon those whom Branner led. Up to this time their attacks by night had been only feints, but this was something more, a sudden and furious attack, so fierce that they could hardly bear up against it.

All was utter confusion when Branner ran out of the pavilion and sprung to the saddle. On all sides the clash of steel, the tramp of rushing steeds, and war-cries sounded strangely on the breath of the silent night: "For God and Moran!"; "The Ospray, the Ospray; 'ware the stoop of the Ospray!"; the hoarse battle-cry of the north Briton, and the war shout of the sons of the Gael.

Six thousand horse, each guided by a gallant warrior, striking right and left with sword, mace or battle-ax, rode straight for the grand pavilion. In the front of each helmet or laurel cap glowed a small fiery ball which shed a phosphorescent glow upon the armor of the warrior who bore it. Hundreds of the king's men were already down, when the commanding voice of Branner called those who had not taken part in the battle so far into something like order.

"Ha—the Craobh Ruadh!" cried the henchman. "Down with your lances, my brave ones; bear the hill-cats back."

The Craobh Ruadh formed in a solid column, and as the footmen, driven like chaff before the wind, reached their front, the warriors divided right and left, and the fugitives passed through. Then, with a shock which seemed to make the mountain rock, the gallant warriors who followed the cross of Moran and the Ospray banner hurled themselves upon the Craobh Ruadh.

It was a royal fray. Brave knights went down, cleft to the brain-pan, or lifted from the saddle by the strong lance. Many a gallant crest was in the dust, and many a noble bosom gored, but the Red Branch nobly held the ground, falling man by man, but keeping their ranks firmly, while the infantry formed behind them.

And now the moon broke suddenly through the parting clouds, and shed a mellow light upon the scene. It showed the broad banners of Moran, Eogan, Parasetus and Fergus; it shone on bright armor and crests of mingled colors; upon sparkling steel and yellow gold. It showed, too, that only the body of horsemen led by the Prince held the field against the whole of the king's army, and taking heart, the footmen brought down their long pikes, lifted their two-handed axes, and advanced in two great bands to take them in the flank.

Connoc Moran saw the movement, and cried out to Ith Eogan, who had just borne a gallant knight from the saddle. A single long blast of a horn was heard, loud, long and sonorous; and instantly the assailing party wheeled out and rode for the pass, leaving a bloody field behind them. After them thundered the Craobh Ruadh, wild for vengeance, and the two great bodies of horsemen plunged into the pass, the Red Branch scarcely a hundred yards behind their assailants. All at once, passing a place where the rocks rose to the height of a hundred feet on each side, the cliffs on either hand bristled with armed men, and great stones, arrows and javelins began to fall upon the heads of the Red Branch Knights, while the warriors of Eogan turned, and with fifty of the best and bravest to form a front, bore back the charging columns.

There, in the front, stood Eogan, every blow laying a man in the dust. There fought Connoc Moran, an ax in each hand, which he used equally well; there Parasetus swayed a

huge two-bladed ax and at every blow a soul went to judgment; the two sons of Fergus, with their long two-handed swords, fought as only the heroic Gael could fight, and rendered themselves subjects for the noble songs of Ossian. And while they fought so well, ruin was sent down upon the heads of the gallant Red Branch from the lofty rocks above them.

Ten thousand men charged into the pass; six thousand, and these bearing many wounds, escaped from the valley of death, while the wild exultant shouts of the victors rung in their ears as they rode out, baffled, beaten, and in sore disgrace.

The followers of Eogan would have charged out after them, but were kept back by their leader.

"Wait," declared Moran; "time enough, when the morning sun begins to shine, to finish the work so well begun. The God of my worship hath struck nobly for you, and Branner knows his power."

The guards were advanced to the mouth of the pass, and most of the leaders returned to the castle in high spirits. Scarcely had they done so when Lady Moran met them.

"Eva Le Fay desires to see you, Sir Prince," she said.

Eogan shrugged his shoulders and made a wry face.

"I am but a poor hand to bear the reproaches of this lady," he said. "By my faith, Moran, why not let her go to join her renegade brother, Branner?"

Moran shook his head.

"Nay," he answered, "she is the safeguard of the Lady Medora. Let her once go free, and I would not answer for the safety of that fair lady a single hour."

"It may be true," replied the Prince. "Well, well; I will see her."

"Be firm, Prince; your will is law here, but I warn you that she is a serpent, who will sting you if she can. I will show you her apartment."

He led the way up a lofty tower, and in a strong but richly furnished chamber, Eva sat upon the edge of a couch, looking like a crushed lily, innocent and pure.

"I know not why I sent for you, my Lord Prince," she said. "I can look for but little sympathy or help here, and yet it seems strange to me that a man of your noble blood should war with a weak woman."

"Lady," responded Eogan, "we did not bid you come here."

"I was mad to measure my weak force against yours," sighed the girl, faintly. "I own my weakness, and only ask, out of your great mercy, that you will let me go away. Never again will Eva Le Fay trouble you."

"It may not be. No harm shall come to you, but remember that you are here as the safeguard of Lady Medora."

"She shall be set at liberty," cried Eva, eagerly. "If you will give me freedom, I swear that you shall have her within three days."

"I must not listen to you. Connoc Moran is my adviser, and he says that you must not go free."

"Connoc Moran is too strong and valiant to oppose a weak woman," she cried, turning to the old knight with both hands clasped. "I pray you on my knees, gallant Moran, to give me my freedom. What harm can I do you if I should be free?"

"I know not," answered Moran. "Death of my life, Eogan; let her go if she will swear to send Medora to us."

"I swear it," was the eager reply.

"If she fail us," said the grim old warrior, "she must not look for mercy in the hour when Eogan claims his own. But call Fiachra; if he desires that she may go, it shall be as he says."

The young lord, who had done noble service that night, quickly answered the summons and heard the plea of Eva.

"I believe that she will keep her word, Eogan," he said. "If you love me, let her go at once."

"Enough," responded Eogan. "Give her a horse and pass her through the guards at the entrance to the valley. Do you fear to ride alone to your brother's camp, Lady Eva?"

She shook her head, and half an hour after, admirably mounted, she passed the last guard and rode out toward the place where the lights of her brother's camp-fires showed against the sky. The look of evil triumph on her face as she passed away gave them food for thought.

"I do not know if we have done right or wrong, Fiachra," declared the Prince, "but I can refuse you nothing."

"My heart misgives me," said the old knight, "but it may be for the best. However that may chance, when the morning breaks we will sweep away the last of the king's army. Our work was almost done when we gave such a signal blow to the Red Branch."

But when morning dawned, and they looked out across the plain, the place where the king's army had rested was vacant. Whether by the advice of Eva, or because he had suffered more than they knew, Branner was gone, bearing away his dead and wounded, and leaving nothing for the victor.

CHAPTER XXVII. THE FATAL GIFT.

THE king had waited long days for news of battle, but each day the couriers came in with only news that Branner yet lay inactive before the entrance to Moran's valley. But at last, in the gray light of dawn, the thunder of horses' feet sounded on the pavement, and a summons came for him at the door of his chamber. The king started up and hurried into the hall, and as he did so, Eva, who stood there alone, sprung into his arms.

The king uttered a cry of joyful surprise, for, hard and cruel though he might be, he had never faltered in his love for this strange, willful girl.

"Now let ruin come," he cried; "since I hold you once more, I care for nothing else, but never shall you leave me again."

"Never, Redmond, oh my king," she answered, softly. "But I fear me that I bring evil tidings mixed with good."

"What mean you?"

"Branner has returned. He had a battle at night in the pass of Moran, and his army suffered much. Yet he would have staid and fought the battle out, but I forbade it, and gave him reasons good. There are not men enough in your realm to drive the army of the Prince out of that strange valley."

"What then?" said the king, drawing her into his apartments.

"Eogan will come against you, and once out of Moran's valley, our chance is at least as good as his. Munster must come to our aid, for he hates Moran."

"He is already on the way, I have heard," declared Redmond.

"Good. With the force he brings we shall have royal sport. But do not be hard upon Branner, for he lost more than a cath of the Red Branch in trying to force the pass."

"I will not blame him," replied the king. "Now that I have you by my side, it seems to me that I am equal to any fortune. Let us pass to other things, and say no more until I see Branner. As for my crown, it is mine, and I will defend it while a drop of blood remains in these veins."

"And all the help I can give you shall be yours, Redmond, oh my king," cried Eva. "I may fall in my work, but be that as it may, I will fall fighting. None shall say that Eva Le Fay or Branner were slack in their duty."

They had entered the king's apartments and were seated upon a luxurious couch, hand clasped in hand, when there was heard outside a rush of feet, and Michael came dashing in with a whoop and whistle.

"Here we are again," he shouted. "Whoop! says the blind man! Back comes Branner with his crest shorn, and leaving half the Red Branch knights lying in the pass of Moran. Soul of my body, king, but I weep for the Red Branch. They are gallant men, the flower of Ulster's chivalry, and it is sad to think that so many of them fell by the hand of Prince Ith Eogan, who helped to make them great in arms."

"Is Branner in sight?" demanded the king. "Then I will go and meet him."

"No need of that, King Redmond. Hither comes the fox, trailing his brush behind him, and with him that old gray rat, Aodh the Druid."

"Away, then, for they love thee none too well, good Michael," said Redmond.

"I fear them not," answered the Jester. "Aodh knows full well, none so well as he, that I must live yet awhile, for only through me can he learn a secret he fain would know."

"And what is that, Michael?"

"How to make the dumb speak; how to put a voice into lips of stone, as was done in the Druid grove on the day when Ith Eogan and Moran were in the hands of the Druids."

"Teach me that, good Michael," said a quiet voice at his elbow, "and name thy own reward."

"Peste!" cried Michael, turning quickly. "Speak of the fiend, and straight the fiend leaps up from the pit."

"Will you give me this secret, friend Michael?" inquired the Druid.

"Not I, Aodh; at least not now. Do I not know that this secret has kept the dagger from my throat, or poison from my bowl, for near a year? And why was this? Because I would not bend the knee or fawn upon those who bask in the favor of the king. I say that one day I will tell you, but until that time comes, the lips of Bel are dumb."

"Bel is mighty; he may force you to do right."

"Bel cannot prevail against me," rung out a powerful voice in the arched roof overhead. "There is no god like mine; there is but one, the Great Invisible."

Aodh trembled, and turned his staring eyes toward the point from which the sound had come, while the Jester stood there with a strange smile upon his face.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Aodh at last. "I was a fool to be startled by such necromancy as this. Before Bel shall you stand, Michael Magone, and answer for this sorcery. I swear to you that if you do not speak, and that quickly, and tell me how this trick is done, I will cite you before the Council."

"Cite me, cite me, worthy Aodh. There is much I might tell which they would love to hear. I could say to the son of Cairnie, thy father stepped too near the Druid grove, and something befell him. I might say to the good people of Emana, the true lord of Cavan, wise Cormac, sleeps not well in the deep dungeon which was given him."

An awful pallor had come into the face of the Druid chief, for up to this moment he had not for an instant dreamed that the eyes of the Jester had been used so well. His hand stole into the bosom of his robe, and but for the presence of the king it would have gone hard with Michael, for there was a steel-like glitter in the eyes of Eva Le Fay, and the hand upon the arm of the king closed with such convulsive force, as to give him pain. But Michael, his arms folded upon his breast, looked the Druid in the face with that inscrutable smile which had baffled many a man ere now, seeing it upon the face of such a man.

"Fore Bel, Michael," cried the king, "you will do yourself a mischief. Go, before worse come to you."

Michael turned quickly and left the room, and with a hissing malediction Aodh started to follow him.

"Take time, Druid," said the king. "Whatever you do, let it be done better than this of which he accuses you."

"I am corrected, oh king," replied the Druid, humbly. "But who would dream that a man like this could know our secrets. I have suspected him of much, but that the secret work of the Druids should be seen by him baffles me. Leave it to me, my master; the man has not long to live."

"Nor have we, unless we work," said the king, testily. "Eogan and Moran will not be long behind Branner. Send Lord Zeagh Cassidy to meet the King of Munster. Say to him that there is need of haste, lest we be borne down by the man he hates so much, Connoc Moran. Bid him hurry on his men, and if Emana falls, it will not be without a struggle."

Aodh hurried away, just as Branner entered the court and met the king.

"Not a word," was the imperious command of Redmond. "You have failed; I know it, and do not blame you. Now to repair, as far as we may, the evil which has been done. Make soldiers; call out every man who can raise a pike or sword, and train them in bands. If we can do no more, at least we may overwhelm them with numbers."

All that day was spent in preparation. The king was in the camp, and worked as hard as any, and Eva Le Fay was in the castle. She sought out the apartments of the Princess, and proffered her services.

"Nay," said Mari. "I cannot accept service of one who is to be Queen of Ulster. Medora can do all I wish, with the aid of my other bower maidens."

"Medora must away to Moran," answered Eva. "When I was set free, I gave my promise that she should be sent to Fiachra, and I must keep my word. I hold the king's signet, and bid her prepare at once."

"I will not leave the Princess," declared Medora.

"If you go not willingly, Medora," averred Eva, "you must be carried, for to Fiachra you must go. I have been driven half mad by the lies which have been told concerning me, that I was your rival in the affection of the Lord of Lena. You shall not stay here."

"Must I lose you, Medora?" sighed the Princess. "The last tie between me and the happy past is severed when you go away. But it must be; I have often thought that you were not safe here, and by your love for me I bid you go."

"A guard waits in the court," said Eva. "And before you go, Medora, I pray you to take this ring. It is a rare jewel; my mother gave it me when I was but a child, and they say it has rare properties, and brings good fortune to the wearer."

She took a rich ruby from her finger.

"Mean you this in good faith, Eva?" asked Medora. "So be it, then; I will take your ring, and hope that we may never be worse enemies than now."

Medora took the ring, and she would have been less than woman if she had not been pleased with it. A magnificent ruby, in whose depth lurked rays of liquid light, set in a broad band of gold, enriched by chasings wrought by a master hand in Rome.

"It is a rare jewel," declared Medora; "take this in return."

And she gave Eva a bracelet, in the form of a serpent, with a head neatly carved, with sapphire eyes. Eva at first refused to receive it, and then Medora tendered back her ring, and she accepted the bracelet. It did not take long for preparation, and at high noon she rode away, attended by twenty chosen men of the Craobh Ruabh, and preceded by a herald, bearing a trumpet. Eva watched her course from the walls of the palace.

"Ay, ride thou on—ride fast to your doom, my Lady Medora—ride on to your death, for it is near at hand. Little you know that the heart which directed the hand which gave you the ring, prompted that hand to drive a dagger to your heart. Go from Emana forever, never to trouble me more."

Medora rode on over the green plains to the northward, where, at a village by the side of the pleasant river she expected to meet her lover. The captain who led the party of the Craobh Ruadh was a strong young knight, sprung from a noble house, and he exerted himself to please, but there was a strange oppression at her heart as she rode. A chill was in her blood for which she could not account, and once or twice she shivered. The strange old thought came to her: "Some one steps across my grave," and she looked fixedly into the face of the captain.

"Where do we meet with Fiachra, worthy knight?" she asked.

"Five leagues hence, my lady, near the sea at Moyle," replied the young man. "He will be right happy to see your face again, and as for me, I hope that after all, though we may fight to-morrow, I may strike hands with my own *Teagh M'le*, Fiachra, Lord of Lena. I shall be glad to greet him."

"You have a gallant heart, young knight," she said.

"I thank thee. In the days to come, should Fiachra and I meet in battle, I will put my sword into my left hand, and give him my right in the midst of the battle. But you tremble, lady; surely you do not dream that I would do you any harm?"

"I do not fear you, gallant knight, but there is an icy chill in my veins. I shudder and grow faint, even as I ride, and—"

Just then, far away in front they heard the beat of coming hoofs. Firm Castler, the young captain of the Red Branch, prepared his lance at once, for he did not know but this was the coming of an enemy. Over a grassy knoll which lay before them came the sound of hoofs, and then the head of a troop of horsemen appeared, and in their front fluttered the well-known banner of Lena. And, at their head, bold and warlike, towered the noble form of Fiachra.

"Fear not, Castler," cried Medora; "Fiachra comes; Fiachra, Lord of Lena."

The Red Branch Knights cheered and tossed their weapons high in the air, for the followers of Fiachra were, many of them, of their own kith and kin.

Fiachra only saw Medora; Medora only saw the Lord of Lena.

A moment more and she was in his arms, her head pillowed upon his mailed breast, and her hair floating about him like a mantle.

"Hold me close, Fiachra, acushla," she sobbed in the dear old Ulster tongue. "I am cold; cold to the heart, Fiachra."

"What means this?" he cried, holding her closer to him. "Who hath dared to do thee wrong, mavourneen dhelish?"

"I know not," she sighed, faintly; "but hold me, hold me, Fiachra, for I sink as in the deep sea. Lift me up on your strong arm, my own knight, for I am dying."

Fiachra uttered a wild cry, and bounded from the saddle, holding the light form of the woman he loved in his arms. She seemed to grow cold on his bosom, and he pressed his lips again and again to hers, when over the crest of the hill came the form of a single horseman, heading straight for the group. He seemed to urge his horse forward with lightning swiftness, and as he came near they saw that it was Michael the Jester, and that he was pressing his steed forward with the point of a dagger. All at once the steed fell dead, and bounding up, the Jester ran forward with incredible swiftness, and reached the side of Fiachra.

His eyes were fixed upon the silent form of Medora, and with an agonized cry he sprung forward.

"Am I too late?" he gasped. "Now may the curse of God lie heavy upon all who have the blood of the thrice accursed Belgæ in their veins."

He caught up the hand of the dying girl and snatched from her finger the ruby ring, which had been given her by Eva. To their utter surprise they saw that the finger was already black and swollen, and in the center, under the plate of the stone, was a single drop of blood, yet fresh.

"Thou cursed work of the Roman," thundered Michael, "I have half a mind—but no; she, Eva Le Fay, shall wear the ring. Haste, Castler; a little water in a cup. Put three drops of the liquor in this vial into as much as would fill a lady's thimble, and make her swallow it. And I, fool that I am, idiot and dreamer—I will suck the poison from her veins."

And he glued his lips to the hand of the fainting girl, while Castler sprung to obey him. All knew well, from his manner, that there was not a moment to be lost, if indeed there was any hope.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MICHAEL MAGONE'S SURGERY—THE MARCH OF EOGAN.

ONCE the Jester paused and spat out from his livid lips a quantity of thick black blood, and again pressed his lips to the hand, while in the mean time Castler had obeyed him, and forced between the clinched teeth of the girl the medicine which the Jester had given him. The second time Michael spat out the blood it was not so dark, and his face brightened.

"Mix a little of that liquor for me, Castler," he said. "Five drops in the same quantity of water."

And again he fastened his lips to the hand of the girl. It was fast losing the strange mottled appearance which had come upon it since the ring had been there, and as the Jester spat out the blood to rinse his mouth with water before receiving the medicine, the blood was bright red in color. He rinsed out his mouth carefully, and then swallowed the medicine.

"I can do no more now, my lord Fiachra," he declared. "Did you not leave the army of Eogan on the march? Death, man; do not hesitate! I only wish to know if Moran's leech is anywhere near at hand."

"An hour's ride," replied Fiachra.

"Then I may safely say that if you reach him in that time, and tell him that she was poisoned by the Belgic Ring, and that I gave her some of the elixir of life and drew out the poison with my lips, he will know what to do, and may save her. Bind her on a horse, with a knight riding on either side to support her, and away. Sir Castler, I will return with you, but I warn you to be silent, you and all your followers, as to what you have seen or heard, for it might bring you death. The hand of Eva Le Fay reaches far."

The two parties separated, and there were gloomy looks upon the faces of the men of the Red Branch. They began to fear that the cause could not prosper which could stoop to the murder of those it hated by means of a poisoned ring, and they hesitated between the Prince and King Redmond. Eva Le Fay, when she sought to wreak her vengeance upon Medora, little thought that the act would do so much to bring down upon her head the vengeance of those who had been their friends.

Fiachra rode hard, and an hour had scarcely passed, when, riding through a green pass beside the sea of Moyle, he saw the banners of Eogan flashing in the sun-rays as he came to claim his own. Eogan had gained ground already. At every mile which they passed over they saw men coming up to join them, knights in armor, men-at-arms with ax or sword, and simple pikemen. The force had greatly augmented, when Fiachra rode furiously into camp with his beloved sustained upon the steed beside him.

"Doctor Malady," he gasped; "where is he? Let him come to me at once."

"I will show you, Fiachra," cried Ronald of the Scar. "Come with me."

Fiachra caught the silent form of Medora in his arms and rode at furious speed, and in the rear they found the old doctor, riding in a great cart, fitted up with all the different tools of his art. Every appliance then known to surgery was seen.

"Aha," whispered the old doctor, lapping his tongue over his thin lips; "a patient; let me look at her face. Poisoned, faith, I see it in every line. Lay her in the cart, upon this couch. Quick, now, tell me how it was done."

Fiachra, knowing the need of haste, told him in as few words as possible the story of the Belgic Ring.

"And Michael was there, Michael the fool, Michael the idiot, the wisest man in Emana. Leave her with me, worthy Fiachra, and I give you my honor that ere the sun goes down she shall be strong again. Ha! I have long wished for a struggle with the deadly drug which lurks in the Belgic Ring. And let me tell you that only I, and Michael the fool, could have saved her life. For, while Eva Le Fay knows the poison, she does not know the remedy. Away; I will not be disturbed."

Fiachra, satisfied of the skill of the wise man, drew back at once, and left him to take care of Medora. At the request of Eogan, who sent a messenger for him, he joined the Prince.

"All goes well, Fiachra," he exclaimed. "Nearly a cath of men have joined us since the march began, and scarcely a turn of the glass but gives us more men. We are doing well."

"I am right glad to hear it. But listen to me, Prince, and I will tell you the treachery of Eva Le Fay."

The Prince listened to the story, and there was a look of fear upon his face before it was finished.

"If she should harm Mari," he gasped.

"I do not think you need fear that, my Prince. Evil is the heart of King Redmond, but in all his wickedness he hath loved his daughter well. But see! A herald."

A horseman, in the splendid dress of a king's herald, was seen advancing at a mad gallop. As he came nearer they saw that it was Murtagh, the king's chief herald, the same who had ridden to warn the king of North Munster of the march of Eogan and Moran. The word of command passed through the army, a halt was called, and Eogan, attended by a glittering band of princes and chiefs, rode forward to meet the herald.

"Hear ye, Prince Ith Eogan; and you, princes, chiefs and knights, give ear," cried the herald. "The most puissant King, Redmond of Ulster, speaks by my mouth."

"Know ye that the king will sleep no more. In your teeth I hurl the names he gives you, traitors to your king. Know that Munster and Connaught will join to beat you to the earth, unless ye accept the mercy which the king will accord you."

"Lay down your arms and submit to the judgment of the king, and none shall be called to account, save only Ith Eogan, Connoc Moran, and Fiachra, Lord of Lena. If ye refuse, on your heads be it."

"Enough, good herald. Well and nobly have you done your duty, and your reward shall be this purse of gold. Ye who have followed me and now desire to bend before King Redmond lay down your arms."

A derisive shout was the only reply to the summons.

"You, see, herald," said Eogan. "It may be that we are marked to die, but we shall die manfully. I have come with arms in my hands to claim my own. Say to the king that I know who murdered my father and mother in the wood of Connel. Say that it was the men of Clare who compassed them about, and that I will prove it with my blade."

"Branner, Lord of Cavan, sends word thus, Prince: 'If Prince Eogan will come to my wedding, he shall have safe conduct, and behold the Princess Mari give me her hand before the king.'"

A look of wild rage came into the face of Eogan. "Say to Branner that I am on the way, and that it may be I will give him work enough to do, rather than to think of marriage or giving in marriage; and that, even at the foot of the king, I will slay him if he forces the Princess into these unholy bonds. Go."

The herald drew back, and again the army resumed its march. As night fell they went into camp beside a little lough, and the guards were set. But the leaders did not sleep, for scarcely three leagues separated them from Emana, and they knew well that King Redmond would not let them sleep if he knew their position. Scarcely was the camp set when over the hills to the north they heard the strains of martial music, and a scout came riding in to say that Munster, with ten thousand men, was on the march to the relief of Emana.

"It is time to strike a blow," said Eogan. "We will teach the King of Munster what it is to tread upon our soil."

And in silence, without beat of drum or sound of trumpet, the army formed behind a wooded hill, and waited for the foe.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ROUT OF MUNSTER—THE FLIGHT OF MARI. The King of Munster, little dreaming of the lion in his path, advanced with flaunting banners and loud music along the broad road which led to Emana.

The heralds of King Redmond had hurried his march, and the troops were travel-stained and dusty. The Knights of Munster were stout warriors, and bowed the knee to none. Often had they met the Red Branch in battle and given them bitter work, and yet at the call of Redmond they had hurried to his aid.

Their course lay over the hill, behind the crest of which the Prince lay waiting.

Suddenly, without warning of any kind, a man sprung into view upon the crest of the hill, in the bright moonlight, and planted a banner upon the slope. The wind lifted it, and they saw on the broad pennon, the Ospray in the act of swooping on its prey.

"Way there, men of Munster!" shouted a commanding voice. "Ware the stoop of the Ospray."

The men of Munster halted, for the sudden appearance of the henchman of Eogan had taken them by surprise.

"Who dares bar the march of Munster?" cried the king, spurring to the front. "Forward, my braves; sweep them from the path!"

Then arose the savage war-cry of the followers of the Ospray, and six thousand men, mounted and in armor, appeared upon the hill.

"Way there!" repeated the henchman. "Place for King Ith Eogan; we give you fair warning."

There was a derisive laugh from the men of Munster, and while it yet lingered on the air, the strong body of horsemen brought down their lances and charged.

The hill was a gradual slope, smooth as a bowling green, and the speed of the horses increased as they ran. As the waves of the sea are separated by the prow of a mighty ship, so did the men of Munster part before the rush of the hardy warriors who charged behind Eogan. The pikemen were trampled under foot, and with a crash of arms which might almost have been heard in Emana, the Knights of Munster and Eogan met. But they were not the men, hardy as they were, to bear the rude shock of such a charge. Horse and man they went down, and many a saddle was empty before ten grains of sand could have fallen from the hour-glass.

Eogan singled out King Roun, a good knight, who was nothing loth to meet him, and spurring their good steeds hard, they rode at each other. But if the Prince had been a skillful knight before he was

driven out of Emana, his year of wandering and fighting had made him a seasoned warrior, equal to the best. The point of his lance, passing under the gorget of the king, lifted him fairly from the saddle, and cast him to the earth with a crash which resounded over the field.

Then the Knights of Munster charged together, bore back the Prince and Connoc Moran, and ringed about their fallen king. Then was seen a spectacle only known to Erin in her days of pride, the devotion of the subject to the king. Hemmed in on every side by a forest of brown lances, beaten down by ax, sword and mace, they still stood firm:

"Each stepping where his comrade stood—
The instant that he fell."

Man by man they dropped, refusing the mercy which was offered them repeatedly by the Prince, who would have saved such gallant men. The ring about the king grew smaller, and their blows more faint, but there was not a dastard among them all. Connoc Moran paused with lifted ax and shouted to a man he knew.

"Enough have you done for honor, Earl Regan," he cried. "Yield, in the name of mercy, although you yield to the outlaw Connoc Moran. You shall have good usage, in that you have so bravely fought."

But Earl Regan only shook his head even while sinking to the earth, bleeding his life away from half a dozen ghastly wounds. The next moment he was down, and the men of Moran and Eogan drew back for a final charge.

It came, and when they had ridden over the cumbered field not a man of the Munster knights was on his feet. There they lay, a royal fellowship of death, the rigid hands grasping the weapons which they never more would lift on battle-field. In the mean time the footmen had been scattered to the four winds, and of ten thousand men who marched up the hill in such gallant guise, scarce three thousand ever saw their homes again.

The king was alive when they unbarred the clasps of his helmet and threw it off. His eyes, already fixed in death, stared vacantly at the faces of the warriors about him. Then came a rattle in his throat, and the gallant king was dead.

"A royal death," cried Eogan. "Make a litter of lances, and bear the king's body to Emana. Say to King Redmond that Eogan sends this body as a sign. He may know by this token the fate of those who bar me in my right."

There was utter dismay in Emana when the body of King Roun was brought in by the strong spearmen, and the herald gave the message of Prince Eogan. There were pale faces about the streets, for they knew well that it must have been a gallant and well appointed force which could so utterly destroy ten thousand men in so short a time. King Redmond stamped and raved, for he had counted much upon the aid of Munster in this battle.

Aodh retained his gloomy courage. He knew well that if the Prince was conqueror now, there would be no hope for the Druids in Ulster. The other priests, however, were losing confidence in the power of their god, and the common people were dropping away from them, as each day passed. They saw that the God of Connoc Moran was more mighty than theirs, and already, in many a mountain hut, and beside the shining streams, the cross had been set up by the firesides. In vain the altar of the Druid smoked with sacrifice as the peasants were detected in the worship of the one true God; their numbers still increased.

"I will baffle him in one thing, at least, cried Redmond. 'Bring Branner to me soon. I swear that Mari shall be his wife ere the rising of the sun.'"

Michael, who was leaning on the back of the king's chair, uttered a low laugh.

"Master," he said, "will you take a fool's advice?"

"Give it, and I can tell you better."

"You see that Prince Ith Eogan is stronger than Branner. Why not give the Prince what he wants, make him Righ-Damhna, and give him the Princess to wife, and then shall you have peace?"

"Do you believe it, Michael?"

"I know that Eogan is the soul of honor, and if you did that he would never lift his hand against you."

"The time has gone by, my good Michael. There was a time, I doubt not, when it might have been done, but now these men are bent upon casting me down, and they will do it if they can. No, sooner would I lie in my grave than bend the knee to Eogan now."

"A willful man will have his way," muttered Michael, as he heard the clank of mailed feet in the passage. "Branner does not love me very well, and I must away. Ha! here is the Lady Eva."

"Eva Le Fay came sweeping in alone. She made a haughty gesture, and Michael at once left the apartment."

"It is time for work, my king," she said. "By holy Bell these hounds have not wasted time, since so soon they have been able to send us the body of King Roun. My blood is up now, and I will kill Eogan, if I must make my way to the very midst of his camp to do it. But courage, Redmond; courage, my king. Connaught cannot be far away, and he hath even a greater power than North Munster. South Munster is afoot, and it will not be many days before he will join us."

"Think you I will wait for them?" responded Redmond. "No, never! When the morning sun rises above the hills, you will see me in the saddle. The Craobh Ruadh burn for vengeance upon their comrades' murderers. I have many brave men, greater far in numbers than the horde of villains coming down upon me, and while I can lift ax or sword, I will fight."

"Well and bravely spoken, Redmond," answered Eva. "But here is Branner; why did you send to him?"

"I have changed my mind. I did intend that he should wed with Mari this very night—"

"Do not change," pleaded Branner, eagerly. "I will strike more bravely if I know that she is fast my wife."

"It shall be done, then," declared the king. "I will myself go and tell her what she must do."

The king strode into the apartments of the Princess.

"You have heard the work which Eogan has

done," he said. This man, whom you love in spite of the wrong he does me night and day, shall feel my power yet. As for you, girl, I give you until the bell strike the hour of four to prepare for a bridal with Branner. See that you are ready."

He turned and strode from the apartment, and again sought Branner.

"Away," he cried. "You have yet some hours for work. When the bell strikes four come with Aodh to my apartments, where you will find the Princess. In the time you have prepare your men, for with the morning light we fall upon Eogan."

The hour came, and with it Aodh and Branner. The Druid priest was glad to foil Eogan in this, for he knew that it would strike near his heart.

"Go, Eva," said the king. "Bring the Princess hither, and if she deny to come, let the guard at the door bring her by main strength. You have my warrant."

Eva hurried away, but soon came flying in, with a white, scared look on her face.

"Redmond; Branner!" she cried. "The Princess is gone."

Redmond bounded to his feet with a savage cry and Branner reeled blindly, like a drunken man.

"Gone! Where was the guard?"

"At the door. He says that Michael, the Jester, came to the door, showed your signet, and was admitted. That soon after they came out together and went away."

"We have been to blame," said Aodh. "That dog has lived too long, and at last he has betrayed you."

"Make proclamation over Emana that the man who brings me the head of that traitor shall receive a great reward," thundered the king. "I will chop him into pieces smaller than the squares on a chess-board, the black dog. To the gates; see if any have passed out."

They were soon satisfied. Michael and the Princess had passed the gates, and were gone. The Jester had made use of the signet which had been stolen long before.

Branner was half mad. His breath came and went in short, hurried gasps, as he realized that Mari was out of his power. They went back together to the king's rooms.

"Aodh," said he, in a gloomy tone, "I have chosen Eva Le Fay for my queen, and at least I will not be baffled in that. We should have been wedded in state ere this, but that she sought to compass the destruction of Moran and Eogan, and fell into a snare. Let the ceremony be completed here."

It was soon done, and heralds rode about the city proclaiming that Eva Le Fay was now Queen of Ulster. And if she failed in all else, the scheming girl had reached the summit of her desires, and the crown of the kingdom pressed her brows, while riders spurred out to all points to call for aid for Ulster from the five kingdoms of Ireland.

But as the morning sun rose above the green hills it showed upon their crest a host with banners, looking down upon Emana. The new-made queen, standing upon the highest tower, shook her clinched hand at them.

"Ay, vile Prince," she cried, "you come in all your power to cast us down. But if we die, at least we will die gloriously, as befits the rank we bear."

"It is a gallant array," said Redmond, looking across the slope. "We shall not have easy work."

"Do you repent that you have made me queen, Redmond?" asked the siren, clasping both hands upon his shoulder.

"Nay, sweeting, never. For the love you have already shown me, I would have laid down my life. And I shall not fight less bravely, because I have a fair queen looking down upon me from the castle walls. Yet faith, I was happier in Clare, when I was lord of that small realm, than I have ever been since until I wedded you. But time presses and honor calls me to the field. One kiss from those sweet lips, and then to put my armor on."

Half an hour later the king rode out of the city, attended by a numerous cavalcade of gallant gentle men, and passed through his camp, followed by the acclamations of the soldiers. And what a shout was raised as the king's banner was lifted by the passing breeze, in the face of the enemy.

"Men of Ulster," shouted the king. "There is a nest of traitors; ye shall see me root it out, if ye will follow bravely."

Then rose the war-shout, and the Craobh Ruadh were in motion to avenge their slaughtered friends.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FIGHT FOR A CROWN—UNDER THE DRUID BLADE. The army of Redmond numbered thirty thousand men in all and that of Eogan perhaps four thousand less, for they had lost some men in the battle with Munster.

But nearly half of Redmond's force was cavalry, the celebrated Craobh Ruadh, who are remembered to this day as chief in the ranks of Irish chivalry.

On the other hand Eogan had not so many horsemen within five thousand, but he had something which was quite as effective, a thousand archers from Connoc Moran's land. The Knights of the Clasp Hands, seven thousand in number depended upon these strong archers to aid them in their charge. Parasetus had brought from Britain nearly as many of the famed bowmen of that isle, and these had taken position upon the left wing, covered by the pikes of the footmen of the Isle of Man. In the center were the horsemen, and on the right the archers of Moran, covered by the men whom the sons of Fergus led from Alba.

"Ha, Branner," thundered King Redmond. "Sweep me that rabble away; charge with the Red Branch."

Branner lifted high his long lance.

"Sons of the Red Branch," he cried, "ye strike to day for the memory of those who fell in the pass of Moran. All who are not cowards, all who love the name of the Red Branch and honor the King of Ulster, charge with me."

The opposing army stood silent on the hill, while that great body of cavalry, the best and bravest under the banner of any monarch of the five kingdoms of Ireland, began to move. At their first movement their progress was no more than a slow trot, and the lances were held aloft, the rays of the rising sun glittering upon the steel points. Then their speed began to increase by degrees, when Eogan was seen to wave his hand. As he did so the archers upon both flanks bent their bows, and ran

out to a distance of a hundred yards, and a flight of arrows, sent with awful force and skill, tore through the ranks of the Craobh Ruadh. Five times the bow-strings twanged before the Red Branch had ridden two hundred yards, and at every volley horse and man came crashing down. The green slope of the hill was lined with bodies, pierced by the long feathered shafts, and then the archers darted back through the openings left for them among the pikemen, and turning again, sent in their deadly shower.

The pace of the charging knights was now awful, and their course was directed at the center, where Ith Eogan stood among the Knights of the Clasp Hands, who sat like statues in their saddles, watching the progress of the Ulster knights.

The center was protected by a body of men who massed together as did the old Roman legion, only the shape of the body was peculiar. It was the shape of a harrow, two lines of stout spearmen, the first kneeling, with the butts of their long spears planted in the earth, the second stooping and advancing their spears, while in the center stood a mass of bowmen, slingers and javelin men, with their weapons ready. It was part of the force of Parasetus, two thousand in all, and upon this steadfast band rushed the Red Branch Knights.

Not a sound was heard in the phalanx as the knights came up the hill, when Parasetus, who sat his war-steed in the midst of the triangle, shouted a sudden order. At once the bow-strings began to twang, the slings to sway, and clouds of javelins went hissing through the air, as the Red Branch, their horses madly bounding, hurled themselves upon the phalanx.

Not a man moved, only they gripped their spears firmly and turned the sharp points here and there to meet the rush of the steeds. The green sward in front was quickly piled with bodies of horses and riders, and yet the Red Branch Knights had not been able to force them back a single foot. A wall of solid masonry could not have been more firm than the formation of Parasetus, who, with a calm smile upon his bearded face, watched the fruitless efforts of the Ulster knights. At last they turned back, and leaving a thousand of their number killed and wounded upon the sod, galloped back out of reach of the deadly shower.

"Come again!" cried Parasetus, in his harsh voice. "We will give you a right royal welcome."

And now King Redmond, who had looked to see the center broken by the charge of his gallant knights, advanced his whole army, center and wings. Had he known that Parasetus was there in the front he would not have allowed his favored horsemen to charge a force which could never be broken by cavalry, and he set in the front a body of men who should have taken part in the first charge.

They were footmen, but armed in light chain mail, with the exception of the lower limbs, which were left free. Their weapons were the double-bladed Irish ax and great two-handed sword, and their advance was made in solid column, bristling with deadly weapons. Their center was occupied by five hundred chosen slingers, men who had reduced the use of that weapon to a certainty, and could hit a mark at a reasonable distance nine times out of ten. This gallant body of men advanced upon a run, whirling their weapons in the air and sending before them a terrible shower of missiles from the deadly slings, and with a wild battle-yell hurled themselves upon the phalanx.

They gave the Britons work to do, such work as they had never had before. The long lances were shattered by the strokes of the double-bladed axes, and great gaps were seen in the phalanx, which quickly closed again as man after man stepped in to fill a place. Irishmen, since first time gave a name to their fair isle, have been stanch warriors, and they proved their valor now. For full ten minutes the combat raged, and then the solid column of the footmen was seen to break into the phalanx, and for the first time it began to waver and bend like a body of reeds shaken by a strong wind.

"Forward, sons of Fergus," cried Ith Eogan.

"Let them feel the power of the sword of Alba."

As he spoke the men of Alba, grasping their long swords, rushed in on the flank of the assailing column. They had done noble work, but now they were forced to turn upon a new foe, for the men of Parasetus were only too glad to fall back and reform their shattered phalanx. And now the Red Branch, seeing the Britons melt away from before the Knights of the Clasp Hands, again charged up the slope, this time with the king and Branner at their head.

Eogan had remained inactive for a purpose. He knew that if he could keep his mailed knights out of the battle until the Red Branch had suffered loss in vain attacks he would be better able to cope with their greater numbers. The archers and the phalanx had done their work well, if they never struck another blow in the battle, but there was still plenty of fight in them, for Parasetus had reformed his men, and resuming their wedge-like shape, they were already marching to take their place in front of the Knights of the Cross; but Moran stopped them.

"Take your ground here, Parasetus," he said, "and meet yon body of bill-men. Give a good account of them."

"And you?"

"Our knights are fresh and eager for the fray. They will gladly meet the Red Branch, and the God of our faith strikes for us."

There was a sudden movement in the cavalry of Eogan. Swords were lifted, lances were set in rest, and broad banners advanced. In the center shone the Osprey, on the right the cross of Moran, and on the left the Ger-Falcon of Lena; and forming their front, the gallant force charged the Red Branch as they came sweeping on.

The shock was terrible! In that first onset both fronts bent and swayed, but the fresh steeds of Eogan were even more than a match for the somewhat jaded horses of King Redmond. Connoc Moran singled out Branner and charged with lance in rest, while Eogan bore his pennon toward the place where blazed the king's broad banner. The struggle was desperate, and knight after knight went down when they threw themselves in the way of Eogan, as he charged the king.

They met at last.

"Now, vile traitor," cried Redmond, as he raised his lance, "here will I end this war."

They crashed together, and never, in all the battles he had passed, had Ith Eogan sustained such a shock as this which Redmond gave him. For a moment his head swam, and it seemed that he would fall from his saddle, but as he passed on he saw the king's horse run masterless, and knew that he had borne him from his saddle. He had already freed his foot for the purpose of leaping to the earth, when he was suddenly surrounded by a hundred men in somber armor, who assailed him furiously, and he was glad to settle himself again under his broad shield, grasp his battle-ax, and defend himself as he might.

He saw at a glance that these men meant to slay or take him, and that they were not knights or nobles, or they would not have combined for an attack upon a single man. Twenty blows were aimed at him at once, and he heard a harsh voice, which he knew well, inciting the men in black to hew him down.

It was the voice of Aodh, and the assailants were Druids!

There was nothing for it but flight. When he saw that this must be, he struck his spurs into the flanks of his war steed and rode down his assailants, crushing them beneath the iron hoofs. He had almost broken through, when he felt the good steed start and shiver and begin to fall.

Instantly he freed his feet from the stirrups, and as the horse struck the earth Eogan alighted on his feet.

The Druids rushed at him, but he cast away his shield, and swaying his sword with his right hand and his ebony handled ax with his left, he laid many a Druid dead upon the sod, and for a moment cleared a great circle about him. But these men had been taught that to die in this cause was glorious, and they had sworn upon the altar of their bloody god to slay him or die in the attempt. Closer and closer drew the ring about him, and though he was in some sort guarded by his mail, he felt that he could not long sustain the unequal combat.

"Down with him!" shrieked Aodh. "Death to the enemy of Bel!"

They hurled themselves upon him together, flinging away their weapons, and clutching at his throat with their naked hands. His weapons were torn from his grasp and yet he made a furious struggle. Three times they brought him to his knee, and three times he rose, shaking off his assailants by the power of his arm. But at last he went down, literally crushed to the earth by overwhelming numbers.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DRUIDS' TRIUMPH—THE DOOM PRONOUNCED.

AODH uttered a wild cry of joy, and plunged into the struggling heap, eager to be the first to dye his hands in the blood of the Prince. He had seized him by the throat and was drawing his broad-bladed dagger, when the earth shook under the hoofs of coming steeds, and a hundred of Fiachra's men, led by the Lord of Lena, came charging across the plain, and leaping from their saddles, rushed upon the Druids sword in hand. In a moment they were scattered and flying for their lives, while Fiachra dragged the Prince to his feet.

"How is it with you?" he cried, eagerly.

"Death of my body," replied Eogan, "that was a wasps' nest, to a certainty. You came just in time, for the dagger of that old gray villain was searching out the joints of my armor. Where is he?"

"Fled with the rest," answered Fiachra. "To the saddle, Prince; the enemy is on the retreat."

A horse was brought for Eogan, and he mounted, and as he did so a man on foot, his hair flying in the wind, and his face deadly pale came rushing up. It was Michael the Jester. He was panting for breath, and his eyes flashed wildly under his bent brows.

"The Druids have them," he gasped. "They have taken Mari and Medora."

The Prince and Fiachra stared wildly at him, without being able to articulate a word. The Princess had joined them on the night before led by Michael, and had been left in the rear, under a strong guard.

"The Druids came suddenly upon us, three hundred strong," declared the Jester. "We fought, but the guards were overpowered, and I was left lying under a heap of slain. But they are taken, and God do so to me and more also, if I do not save them or die."

"See, see," cried Fiachra. "Yonder they go."

Not far away, but quite near the castle, a strong body of dark-robed men could be seen hurrying toward the city. In their midst, distinguished by their fluttering robes, the maidens could be seen. But the ground between them and their lovers was occupied by the army of Redmond, fleeing in some disorder, but still too strong to be hard pressed. It would have been impossible, even with the aid of the whole army, to have broken through them and rescued the maidens.

"Leave it to me," said Michael. "I have greater power than you think, and if I dared show myself in the palace, I would have them out of that before morning. I will do it yet, if all works well."

He darted away, and was lost in the hurrying throng which was pursuing King Redmond into the city, and Fiachra and the Prince sprang to the head of their men and drove the enemy before them to the very gates of the castle. Here they turned, under the shelter of the walls, and forced Eogan's army back, while the engines on the wall began to rain great stones among them, and they turned and again took a station on the hill, which they began to fortify against a night attack.

King Redmond was borne into the city, somewhat shaken by the rude way in which Eogan had cast him down, but more hurt in mind than body. Even to Eva he was sullen, but half an hour later Aodh strode into his presence, leading upon either side the two maidens, Mari and Medora.

"See what a gift I bring you, oh, king," he said. "Beaten at one point, we have hurt Eogan and Fiachra on another."

"You have earned my lasting gratitude, Druid," replied the king. "Now, Mari, I have you again. Traitor to your father, lover of his enemy, you shall see how my love can turn to hate. I have at least this to be thankful for, that I can be revenged on him through you."

Mari did not speak.

"Call in Branner, Aodh; let him look upon the face of this false girl. They tell me, Druid, that you have done good service this day, and would have ended my enemy if aid had not come to him in time."

"My dagger was already at his throat when Fiachra came—the curse of Bel lie heavy on his head. Well, a time will come, I doubt not," answered Aodh.

He went out, and quickly returned with Branner. The face of the henchman grew bright as he saw Mari.

"This half repays all the evil which hath befallen us," he exclaimed. "With Mari and Medora in our hands, we can make terms with Eogan and drive him from the walls."

"Not with my will, Branner," responded Mari. "I would sooner die than have Eogan lose his own. For my father, I love him still, but he has done wrong, and he knows it. Had he listened to Eogan long ago, he would not now be in this strait."

"She is yours, Branner," said the king, coldly. "Take her away, and see that she does not escape."

"No fear of that," replied Branner, as he laid his hand on the wrist of the Princess. "Ha, Medora, you must be poison proof, or you would not be here. Has the Belgic ring lost its power?"

"I will find another way," hissed Queen Eva, with an evil glance. "You have made Branner a present, my king; give *this* girl to me."

"She is yours."

"Call Keth there," cried the Queen; and there came in a dark-browed man, who looked ready to do any evil deed.

"You will take the Lady Medora to the dungeon in the east tower. Place her before the window in the moving seat, and leave her there."

Keth fastened his clutch upon the wrist of Medora and led her away.

Branner had already disappeared with Mari, and the party passed through the long halls together. They were collected at the main staircase, when there arose without a great tumult, and there poured into the hall a great crowd, members of the Craobh Ruadh, citizens, soldiers of all classes, tossing their weapons and shouting: "Death to Branner; down with King Redmond, the murderers of Connor and Ruda!"

"It has come," hissed Branner, as he sprung through the door into the passage with Mari in his arms. "After me, Keth; to me, Aodh."

The heavy door clanged behind them, and the baffled crowd expended their strength against it in vain. A side door opened, and the king and Eva joined them.

"All the fiends in the pit have broken loose at once," hissed Redmond. "I shall go mad; the city is in an uproar—my race is run."

"Hear them!" raved Branner. "Wolves tear their throats! do they know what they are doing? If we could get out into the plain we might yet run free, and we could get allies enough."

"I am half tempted to fling myself upon their spears," muttered the king, as he glanced from the window into the broad court below. "Look at the dogs, Branner; they have opened the gates to our enemies. By my father's spirit, I will speak to them."

He stepped boldly out upon the broad window-sill and looked down into the court. He saw that the city gates were open and the enemy were pouring in, mingling with his own soldiers, and fraternizing with them. A troop of knights were riding up the main street, and at their head, distinguished by his mighty stature, rode Eogan, with Connoc Moran and Fiachra upon either side. And just behind them, pale, emaciated, with white hair flowing down upon his shoulders, rode Cormac, Lord of Cavan! Wise Cormac, lost so long before.

"Ha," cried Aodh, as he saw Wise Cormac, "now I understand how this has chanced. Cormac has escaped from our prison, and has told them how we disposed of Cairnie. More than this, they know who killed King Connor and his queen."

The street below was a scene of wild confusion. Plumed caps were tossed in the air, and thousands of voices were heard raised in praise of Eogan. The king ground his teeth hard, and seemed about to cast himself into the court below, when Aodh laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Come," he said; "I will show you a way of escape."

"I will not fly," thundered Redmond. "If I must kiss the earth under the feet of yonder boy, better do it now than be taken in ignominious flight. Come, my daughter; we will go to Eogan, and ask him in his charity what he will do for us."

"Stay," cried Branner, barring the king's way. "You forget that the Princess is mine."

"Would that I had never seen your face, Branner. By the Christian's God, your dying queen spoke the truth when she prophesied my fall. Nay, I will take what I can get, and Mari shall be my safeguard."

"And you will leave me to my fate?" sneered Branner with a strange glitter in his eyes.

"Ay, will I; little did I ever gain from you," was the sullen answer.

"Eva," cried Branner, "will you suffer him to abandon me?"

Eva came near the king and laid her hand upon his arm, but he shook it off with a savage curse.

"Away, sorceress," he cried. "But for you I should have been friends with Eogan, and his strong arm would have been for me, not against me."

Eva stepped back with a face whiter than ashes. Her hand dropped to the hilt of a jeweled dagger in her belt, and twice she half drew it, but the sound of heavy blows upon the doors told that the enemy were upon their track.

"Come away," growled Aodh. "Leave this vile king who turns upon those who shed their blood for him, to the fate he deserves."

"One more effort," responded Eva. "Redmond, my king, you know that I have loved you, and—"

He thrust her rudely back, and caught the hand of Mari. Scarcely had he done so when he fell, pierced through the throat by the dagger of Branner.

"Away there, Aodh," shouted the henchman, as he caught up Mari. "Lead the way, for you know it best."

"Drag her along, Keth," cried Eva, to the man

who held Medora. "I may die, but not until I have taken sweet revenge on her."

They sprung together into the room formerly occupied by Moran and Eogan on the night when they were taken by the Druids. Aodh sprung to the wall and touched a spring, and a panel, artificially concealed, slid back, and showed a narrow passage. The last of the fugitives passed through, the panel closed, and just then the door came crashing down and the crowd rushed in to find King Redmond lying in his blood with the dagger of Branner in his throat. Foremost among those who entered was Eogan, and there was a sad look upon his noble face as he looked down upon the dying king.

"Speak, Redmond," he said, "did you kill my parents?"

The dying man inclined his head, for he was past speaking. Then, with a loud rattle in his throat, he fell back, and in a moment he was dead.

"He hath fulfilled his mission," declared Wise Cormac, who had come in with the others. "But where is Michael, the Jester? If he were here he would tell us where to go."

"Call him not Michael, the Jester, longer," replied Connoc Moran. "Call him Michael Moran, my brother, a priest of the religion of Jesus. Together we have labored, he in his way and I in mine, and I believe his way the best of all. If he hath fallen, I shall think our advantage more than paid for."

But the fugitives, hurrying through the secret passage, came at last to a great room underground, where, in solemn conclave, sat all that remained of the Druids. For, when the gates had been opened to the men of Eogan, they alone had resisted, and of six hundred men who had gone into battle that morning, scarce fifty remained alive.

"Priests of Bel," said Aodh, "our time has come in Ulster. Never again shall we set up the song within our sacred groves; never again shall the altar smoke with the blood of sacrifice. But one oblation shall we give thee, oh Bel; the blood of these maidens shall be thine."

And even Branner, who would not have had Mari die, saw in the eyes of the Druids that, if he should dare to resist, he would only bring death upon his own head.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MICHAEL MORAN—THE LAST OF THE DRUIDS—DEATH OF LE FAY—LAST WORDS.

THE two noble maidens saw that death was near at hand and that they could not escape.

"Druids," cried Mari, boldly, "we are in your hands and you may kill us, but I thank the God of the Christian, my God now, that our blood will be the last upon your unholy altars."

"Blasphemy," hissed Aodh, licking his white lips. "You are thrice doomed now. Accursed be the tongue which hath spoken in worship of the Christian's God. Bel will receive the sacrifice gladly. Prepare your knives, oh Druids; cut them in pieces."

Fifty blades flashed in the light of the lamps, when, with a sudden cry, a light figure bounded before the maidens, holding up before the eyes of the Druids an ebony cross. It was Michael the Jester, but his face seemed glorified. There was an air of majesty about it which they had never seen there, and the Druids paused in wonder.

"Never!" he thundered. "Bel hath no power."

"I know you now," screamed Aodh. "That voice spoke from the lips of Bel; that voice sounded in the palace so mysteriously and often."

"Ay, Druid. 'Twas but a simple power I have to cast my voice where I will. You see before you an apostle of the true faith, the brother of Connoc Moran. For the downfall of this unholy faith I have wrought long, and success has come at last."

"Another sacrifice for Bel," cried Aodh, tossing his long arms in the air, a knife gleaming in his right hand. "This at least he will accept."

He sprung toward the immovable figure of Michael Moran, but in mid career he paused, an arrow in his heart. Then out of the dark passage leaped four-score Knights of the Clasp'd Hands and sprung upon the Druids. The contest was short, sharp and bitter, and when it was over, of all the enemies of Mari and Medora, only Eva, Queen of Ulster, remained alive. She was sitting on the bloody floor, holding the head of her dead brother on her knees. "See, Eva Le Fay," said Michael Moran, sadly, "to what thy lust for power hath led at last. Redmond lies dead by the hand of your brother; Branner's life is sped, and you remain to taste the mercy of the victor."

"And think you I would live to lick the ground under the feet of Mari? No, no, never! So dies the last of the noble race of the Belgæ."

She held aloft a tiny glass globe, no larger than a pea. Moran sprung toward her, but before he could reach her she had crushed the ball between her teeth.

The effect was instantaneous. She struggled for a moment, cast a look of mingled triumph and hate upon the group, and fell dead upon her brother's breast. The last of the Belgic race had died by the Belgic venom—the same as that contained in the ring.

Ith Eogan reigned in Ulster, and ruled long and well, and there was no greater king or braver knight than he in all the five kingdoms. And Mari became his queen, and was well beloved by all.

Fiachra wedded Medora and was raised higher in rank and made general of the Craobh Ruadh. And while the king ruled none could stand before the Red Branch, not even the knights of Connoc Moran.

The brave outlaw and his noble brother had done their work well, and when Eogan built up a cathedral in Ennana, Michael Moran became a bishop. The dark reign of the Druids was over forever, and peace smiled upon the happy vales of Ulster. For the king loved his people as they loved him; his wife was fair and loyal; his friends were tried and true, and he leaned upon the arm of the founder of that faith which is the faith of civilized man over all the globe. And, with the Red Branch and the Clasp'd Hands at his back, he feared no foe, and went down to his grave full of years, happy that he had made his people great. And in the year that followed Ireland saw no better king than he who was set upon the throne by the King's Fool.

THE END.

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